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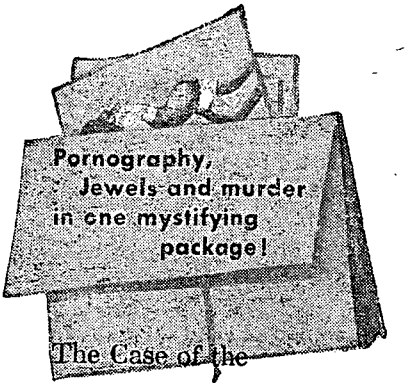

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YOU CAN'T BE A LITTLE GIRL ALL YOUR LIFE

by STANLEY ELLIN

IT WAS THE SILENCE THAT WOKE her. Not suddenly—Tom had pointed out more than once with a sort of humorous envy that she slept like the dead—but slowly; drawing her up from a hundred fathoms of sleep so that she lay just on the surface of consciousness, eyes closed, listening to the familiar pattern of night sounds around her, wondering where it had been disarranged.

Then she heard the creak of a floorboard—the reassuring creak of a board under the step of a late-returning husband—and understood. Even while she was a hundred fathoms under, she must have known that Tom had come into the room, must have anticipated the click of the bed-light being switched on, the solid thump of footsteps from bed to closet, from closet to dresser—the unfailing routine which always culminated with his leaning over her and whispering, "Asleep?" and her small groan which said yes, she was asleep but glad he was home, and would he please not stay up all the rest of the night working at those papers.

So he was in the room now, she knew, but for some reason he was not going through the accustomed routine, and that was what had awakened her. Like the time they had the cricket, poor thing; for a week it had relentlessly chirped away the dark hours from some hidden corner of the house until she'd got used to it. The night it died, or went off to make a cocoon or whatever crickets do, she'd lain awake for an hour waiting to hear it, and then slept badly after that until she'd got used to living without it.

Poor thing, she thought drowsily, not really caring very much but waiting for the light to go on, the footsteps to move comforting-

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ly between bed and closet. Somehow the thought became a serpent crawling down her spine, winding tight around her chest. *Poor thing,* it said to her, *poor stupid thing—it isn't Tom at all!*

She opened her eyes at the moment the man's gloved hand brutally slammed over her mouth. In that moment she saw the towering shadow of him, heard the sob of breath in his throat, smelled the sour reek of liquor. Then she wildly bit down on the hand that gagged her, her teeth sinking into the glove, grinding at it. He smashed his other fist squarely into her face. She went limp, her head lolling half off the bed. He smashed his fist into her face again.

After that, blackness rushed in on her like a whirlwind.

She looked at the pale balloons hovering under the ceiling and saw with idle interest that they were turning into masks, but with features queerly reversed, mouths on top, eyes below. The masks moved and righted themselves. Became faces. Dr. Vaughn. And Tom. And a woman. Someone with a small white dunce cap perched on her head. A nurse.

The doctor leaned over her, lifted her eyelid with his thumb, and she discovered that her face was one throbbing bruise. He withdrew the thumb and grunted. From long acquaintance she recognized it as a grunt of satisfaction.

He said, "Know who I am, Julie?"

"Yes."

"Know what happened?"

"Yes."

"How do you feel?"

She considered that. "Funny. I mean, far away. And there's a buzzing in my ears."

"That was the needle. After we brought you around you went into a real sweet hysteria, and I gave you a needle. Remember that?"

"No."

"Just as well. Don't let it bother you."

It didn't bother her. What bothered her was not knowing the time. Things were so unreal when you didn't know the time. She tried to turn her head toward the clock on the night-table, and the doctor said, "It's a little after six. Almost sunrise. Probably be the first time you've ever seen it, I'll bet."

She smiled at him as much as her swollen mouth would permit. "Saw it last New Year's," she said.

Tom came around the other side of the bed. He sat down on it and took her hand tightly in his. "Julie," he said. "Julie, Julie, Julie," the words coming out in a rush as if they had been building up in him with explosive force.

She loved him and pitied him for that, and for the way he looked. He looked awful. Haggard, un-

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shaven, his eyes sunk deep in his head, he looked as if he were running on nerve alone. Because of her, she thought unhappily, all because of her.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Sorry!" He gripped her hand so hard that she winced. "Because some lunatic—some animal—!"

"Oh, please!"

"I know. I know you want to shut it out, darling, but you mustn't yet. Look, Julie, the police have been waiting all night to talk to you. They're sure they can find the man, but they need your help. You'll have to describe him, tell them whatever you can about him. Then you won't even have to think about it again. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes."

"I knew you would."

He started to get up but the doctor said, "No, you stay here with her. I'll tell them on my way out. Have to get along, anyhow—these all-night shifts are hard on an old man." He stood with his hand on the doorknob. "When they find him," he said in a hard voice, "I'd like the pleasure—" and let it go at that, knowing they understood.

The big, white-haired man with the rumpled suit was Lieutenant Christensen of the police department. The small, dapper man with the mustache was Mr. Dahl of the district attorney's office. Ordinarily, said Mr. Dahl, he did not take a personal part in criminal investigations, but when it came to—that is, in a case of this kind special measures were called for. Everyone must cooperate fully. Mrs. Barton must cooperate, too. Painful as it might be, she must answer Lieutenant Christensen's questions frankly and without embarrassment. Would she do that?

Julie saw Tom nodding encouragement to her. "Yes," she said.

She watched Lieutenant Christensen draw a notebook and pad from his pocket. His gesture, when he pressed the end of the pen to release its point, made him look as if he were stabbing at an insect.

He said, "First of all, I want you to tell me exactly what happened. Everything you can remember about it."

She told him, and he scribbled away in the notebook, the pen clicking at each stroke.

"What time was that?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"About what time? The closer we can pin it down, the better we can check on alibis. When did you go to bed?"

"At ten thirty."

"And Mr. Barton came home around twelve, so we know it happened between ten thirty and twelve." The lieutenant addressed himself to the notebook, then pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Now for something even more important."

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"Yes?"

"Just this. Would you recognize the man if you saw him again?"

She closed her eyes, trying to make form out of that monstrous shadow, but feeling only the nauseous terror of it. "No," she said.

"You don't sound so sure about it."

"But I am."

"How can you be? Yes, I know the room was kind of dark and all that, but you said you were awake after you first heard him come in. That means you had time to get adjusted to the dark. And some light from the street-lamp outside hits your window shade here. You wouldn't see so well under the conditions, maybe, but you'd see something, wouldn't you? I mean, enough to point out the man if you had the chance. Isn't that right?"

She felt uneasily that he was right and she was wrong, but there didn't seem to be anything she could do about it. "Yes," she said, "but it wasn't like that."

Dahl, the man from the district attorney's office, shifted on his feet. "Mrs. Barton," he started to say, but Lieutenant Christensen silenced him with a curt gesture of the hand.

"Now look," the lieutenant said. "Let me put it this way. Suppose we had this man some place where you could see him close up, but he couldn't see you at all. Can you picture that? He'd be right up there in front of you, but he wouldn't even know you were looking at him. Don't you think it would be pretty easy to recognize him then?"

Julie found herself growing desperately anxious to give him the answer he wanted, to see what he wanted her to see; but no matter how hard she tried she could not. She shook her head hopelessly, and Lieutenant Christensen drew a long breath.

"All right," he said, "then is there anything you can tell me about him? How big was he? Tall, short, or medium?"

The shadow towered over her. "Tall. No, I'm not sure. But I think he was."

"White or colored?"

"I don't know."

"About how old?"

"I don't know."

"Anything distinctive about his clothes? Anything you might have taken notice of?"

She started to shake her head again, then suddenly remembered. "Gloves," she said, pleased with herself. "He was wearing gloves."

"Leather or wool?"

"Leather." The sour taste of the leather was in her mouth now. It made her stomach turn over.

Click-click went the pen, and the lieutenant looked up from the notebook expectantly. "Anything else?"

"No."

The lieutenant frowned. "It

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doesn't add up to very much, does it? I mean, the way you tell it."

"I'm sorry," Julie said, and wondered why she was so ready with that phrase now. What was it that *she* had done to feel sorry about? She felt the tears of self-pity start to rise, and she drew Tom's hand to her breast, turning to look at him for comfort. She was shocked to see that he was regarding her with the same expression that the lieutenant wore.

The other man—Dahl—was saying something to her.

"Mrs. Barton," he said, and again, "Mrs. Barton," until she faced him. "I know how you feel, Mrs. Barton, but what I have to say is terribly important. Will you please listen to me?"

"Yes," she said numbly.

"When I talked to you at one o'clock this morning, Mrs. Barton, you were in a state—well, you do understand that I wasn't trying to badger you then. I was working on your behalf. On behalf of the whole community, in fact."

"I don't remember. I don't remember anything about it."

"I see. But you understand now, don't you? And you do know that there's been a series of these outrages in the community during recent years, and that the administration and the press have put a great deal of pressure—rightly, of course—on my office and on the police department to do something about it?"

Julie let her head fall back on the pillow, and closed her eyes. "Yes," she said. "If you say so."

"I do say so. I also say that we can't do very much unless the injured party—the victim—helps us in every way possible. And why won't she? Why does she so often refuse to identify the criminal or testify against him in cases like this? Because she might face some publicity? Because she might have started off by encouraging the man, and is afraid of what he'd say about her on the witness stand? I don't care what the reason is, that woman is guilty of turning a wild beast loose on her helpless neighbors!

"Look, Mrs. Barton. I'll guarantee that the man who did this has a police record, and the kind of offenses listed on it—well, I wouldn't even want to name them in front of you. There's a dozen people at headquarters right now looking through all such records and when they find the right one it'll lead us straight to him. But after that you're the only one who can help us get rid of him for keeps. I want you to tell me right now that you'll do that for us when the time comes. It's your duty. You can't turn away from it."

"I know. But I didn't see him."

"You saw more than you realize, Mrs. Barton. Now, don't get me wrong, because I'm not saying that you're deliberately holding out, or anything like that. You've had

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a terrible shock. You want to forget it, get it out of your mind completely. And that's what'll happen, if you let yourself go this way. So, knowing that, and not letting yourself go, do you think you can describe the man more accurately now?"

Maybe she had been wrong about Tom, she thought, about the way he had looked at her. She opened her eyes hopefully and was bitterly sorry she had. His expression of angry bewilderment was unchanged, but now he was leaning forward, staring at her as if he could draw the right answer from her by force of will. And she knew he couldn't. The tears overflowed, and she cried weakly; then magically a tissue was pressed into her hand. She had forgotten the nurse. The upside-down face bent over her from behind the bed, and she was strangely consoled by the sight of it. All these men in the room—even her husband—had been made aliens by what had happened to her. It was good to have a woman there.

"Mrs. Barton!" Dahl's voice was unexpectedly sharp, and Tom turned abruptly toward him. Dahl must have caught the warning in that, Julie realized with gratitude; when he spoke again his voice was considerably softer. "Mrs. Barton, please let me put the matter before you bluntly. Let me show you what we're faced with here.

"A dangerous man is on the prowl. You seem to think he was drunk, but he wasn't too drunk to know exactly where he could find a victim who was alone and unprotected. He probably had this house staked out for weeks in advance, knowing your husband's been working late at his office. And he knew how to get into the house. He scraped this window sill here pretty badly, coming in over it.

"He wasn't here to rob the place—he had the opportunity but he wasn't interested in it. He was interested in one thing, and one thing only." Surprisingly, Dahl walked over to the dresser and lifted the framed wedding picture from it. "This is you, isn't it?"

"Yes," Julie said in bewilderment.

"You're a very pretty young woman, you know." Dahl put down the picture, lifted up her hand mirror, and approached her with it. "Now I want to show you how a pretty young woman looks after she's tried to resist a man like that." He suddenly flashed the mirror before her and she shrank in horror from its reflection.

"Oh, please!" she cried.

"You don't have to worry," Dahl said harshly. "According to the doctor you'll heal up fine in a while. But until then, won't you see that man as clear as day every time you look into this thing? Won't you be able to point him out, and lay your hand on the Bible, and swear he was the one?"

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She wasn't sure any more. She looked at him wonderingly, and he threw wide his arms, summing up his case. "You'll know him when you see him again, won't you?" he demanded.

"Yes," she said.

She thought she would be left alone after that, but she was wrong. The world had business with her, and there was no way of shutting it out. The doorbell chimed incessantly. The telephone in the hall rang, was silent while someone took the call, then rang again. Men with hard faces—police officials—would be ushered into the room by Tom. They would duck their heads at her in embarrassment, would solemnly survey the room, then go off in a corner to whisper together. Tom would lead them out, and would return to her side. He had nothing to say. He would just sit there, taut with impatience, waiting for the doorbell or telephone to ring again.

He was seldom apart from her, and Julie, watching him, found herself increasingly troubled by that. She was keeping him from his work, distracting him from the thing that mattered most to him. She didn't know much about his business affairs, but she did know he had been working for months on some very big deal—the one that had been responsible for her solitary evenings at home—and what would happen to it while he was away from his office? She had only been married two years, but she was already well-versed in the creed of the businessman's wife. Troubles at home may come and go, it said, but Business abides. She used to find that idea repellent, but now it warmed her. Tom would go to the office, and she would lock the door against everybody, and there would be continuity.

But when she hesitantly broached the matter he shrugged it off. "The deal's all washed up, anyhow. It was a waste of time. That's what I was going to tell you about when I walked in and found you like that. It was quite a sight." He looked at her, his eyes glassy with fatigue. "Quite a sight," he said.

And sat there waiting for the doorbell or telephone to ring again.

When he was not there, one of the nurses was. Miss Shepherd, the night nurse, was taciturn. Miss Waldemar, the day nurse, talked.

She said, "Oh, it takes all kinds to make this little old world, I tell you. They slow their cars coming by the house, and they walk all over the lawn, and what they expect to see I'm sure I don't know. It's just evil minds, that's all it is, and wouldn't they be the first ones to call you a liar if you told them that to their faces? And children in the back seats! What is it, sweetie? You look as if you can't get comfy."

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"I'm all right, thank you," Julie said. She quailed at the thought of telling Miss Waldemar to please keep quiet or go away. There were people who could do that, she knew, but evidently it didn't matter to them how anyone felt about you when you hurt their feelings. It mattered to Julie a great deal.

Miss Waldemar said, "But if you ask me who's really to blame I'll tell you right out it's the newspapers. Just as well the doctor won't let you look at them, sweetie, because they're having a party, all right. You'd think what with Russia and all, there's more worthwhile things for them to worry about, but no, there it is all over the front pages as big as they can make it. Anything for a nickel, that's their feeling about it. Money, money, money, and who cares if children stand there gawking at headlines and getting ideas at their age!

"Oh, I told that right to one of those reporters, face to face. No sooner did I put foot outside the house yesterday when he steps up, bold as brass, and asks me to get him a picture of you. Steal one, if you please! They're all using that picture from your high school yearbook now; I suppose they want something like that big one on the dresser. And I'm not being asked to do him any favors, mind you; he'll pay fifty dollars cash for it! Well, that was my chance to tell him a thing or two, and don't think I didn't. You are sleepy, aren't you, lamb? Would you like to take a little nap?"

"Yes," said Julie.

Her parents arrived. She had been eager to see them, but when Tom brought them into her room the eagerness faded. Tom had always despised her father's air of futility—the quality of helplessness that marked his every gesture—and never tried to conceal his contempt. Her mother, who had started off with the one objection that Tom was much too old for Julie—he was thirty to her eighteen when they married—had ultimately worked up to the point of telling him he was an outrageous bully, a charge which he regarded as a declaration of war.

That foolish business, Julie knew guiltily, had been her fault. Tom, who could be as finicking as an old maid about some things, had raged at her for not emptying the pockets of his jackets before sending them to the tailor, and since she still was, at the time, more her mother's daughter than her husband's wife, she had weepingly confided the episode to her mother over the telephone. She had not made that mistake again, but the damage was done. After that her husband and her parents made up openly hostile camps, while she served as futile emissary between them.

When they all came into the

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room now, Julie could feel their mutual enmity charging the air. She had wistfully hoped that what had happened would change that, and knew with a sinking heart that it had not. What it came to, she thought resignedly, is that they hated each other more than they loved her. And immediately she was ashamed of the thought.

Her father weakly fluttered his fingers at her in greeting, and stood at the foot of the bed looking at her like a lost spaniel. It was a relief when the doorbell rang and he trailed out after Tom to see who it was. Her mother's eyes were red and swollen; she kept a small, damp handkerchief pressed to her nose. She sat down beside Julie and patted her hand.

"It's awful, darling," she said. "It's just awful. Now you know why I was so much against your buying the house out here, way at the end of nowhere. How are you?"

"All right."

Her mother said, "We would have been here sooner except for grandma. We didn't want her to find out, but some busybody neighbor went and told her. And you know how she is. She was prostrated. Dr. Vaughn was with her for an hour."

"I'm sorry."

Her mother patted her hand again. "She'll be all right. You'll get a card from her when she's up and around."

Her grandmother always sent greeting cards on every possible occasion. Julie wondered mirthlessly what kind of card she would find to fit this occasion.

"Julie," her mother said, "would you like me to comb out your hair?"

"No, thank you, mother."

"But it's all knots. Don't those nurses ever do anything for their money? And where are your dark glasses, darling? The ones you use at the beach. It wouldn't hurt to wear them until that discoloration is gone, would it?"

Julie felt clouds of trivia swarming over her, like gnats. "Please, mother."

"It's all right, I'm not going to fuss about it. I'll make up a list for the nurses when I go. Anyhow, there's something much more serious I wanted to talk to you about, Julie. I mean, while Dad and Tom aren't here. Would it be all right if I did?"

"Yes."

Her mother leaned forward tensely. "It's about—well, it's about what happened. How it might make you feel about Tom now. Because, Julie, no matter how you might feel, he's your husband, and you've always got to remember that. I respect him for that, and you must, too, darling. There are certain things a wife owes a husband, and she still owes them to him even after something awful like this happens. She's duty bound.

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Why do you look like that, Julie? You do understand what I'm saying, don't you?"

"Yes," Julie said. She had been chilled by a sudden insight into her parents' life together. "But please don't talk about it. Everything will be all right."

"I know it will. If we aren't afraid to look our troubles right in the eye they can never hurt us, can they? And, Julie, before Tom gets back there's something else to clear up. It's about him."

Julie braced herself. "Yes?"

"It's something he said. When Dad and I came in we talked to him a while and when—well, you know what we were talking about, and right in the middle of it Tom said in the most casual way—I mean, just like he was talking about the weather or something—he said that when they caught that man he was going to kill him. Julie, he terrified me. You know his temper, but it wasn't temper or anything like that. It was just a calm statement of fact. He was going to kill the man, and that's all there was to it. But he meant it, Julie, and you've got to do something about it."

"Do what?" Julie said dazedly. "What can I do?"

"You can let him know he mustn't even talk like that. Everybody feels the way he does—we all want that monster dead and buried. But it isn't up to Tom to kill him. He could get into terrible trouble that way! Hasn't there been enough trouble for all of us already?"

Julie closed her eyes. "Yes," she said.

Dr. Vaughn came and watched her walk around the room. He said, "I'll have to admit you look mighty cute in those dark glasses, but what are they for? Eyes bother you any?"

"No," Julie said. "I just feel better wearing them."

"I thought so. They make you look better to people, and they make people look better to you. Say, that's an idea. Maybe the whole human race ought to take up wearing them permanently. Be a lot better for their livers than alcohol, wouldn't it?"

"I don't know," Julie said. She sat down on the edge of the bed, huddled in her robe, its sleeves covering her clasped hands, mandarin style. Her hands felt as if they would never be warm again. "I want to ask you something."

"All right, go ahead and ask."

"I shouldn't, because you'll probably laugh at me, but I won't mind. It's about Tom. He told mother that when they caught the man he was going to kill him. I suppose he was just—I mean, he wouldn't really try to do anything like that, would he?"

The doctor did not laugh. He said grimly, "I think he might try to do something exactly like that."

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"To *kill* somebody?"

"Julie, I don't understand you. You've been married to Tom—how long is it now?"

"Two years."

"And in those two years did you ever know him to say he would do something that he didn't sooner or later do?"

"No."

"I would have bet on that. Not because I know Tom so well, mind you, but because I grew up with his father. Every time I look at Tom I see his father all over again. There was a man with Lucifer's own pride rammed into him like gunpowder, and a hair-trigger temper to set it off. And repressed. Definitely repressed. Tom is, too. It's hard not to be when you have to strain all the time, keeping the emotional finger off that trigger. I'll be blunt, Julie. None of the Bartons has ever impressed me as being exactly well-balanced. I have the feeling that if you gave any one of them enough motive for killing, he'd kill, all right. And Tom owns a gun, too, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"Well, you don't have to look that scared about it," the doctor said. "It would have been a lot worse if we hadn't been warned. This way I can tell Christensen and he'll keep an eye on your precious husband until they've got the man strapped into the electric chair. A bullet's too good for that kind of animal, anyhow."

Julie turned her head away and the doctor placed his finger against her chin and gently turned it back. "Look," he said, "I'll do everything possible to see Tom doesn't get into trouble. Will you take my word for that?"

"Yes."

"Then what's bothering you? The way I talked about putting that man in the electric chair? Is that what it is?"

"Yes. I don't want to hear about it."

"But why? You of all people, Julie! Haven't you been praying for them to find him? Don't you hate him enough to want to see him dead?"

It was like turning the key that unlocked all her misery.

"I do!" she said despairingly. "Oh, yes, I do! But Tom doesn't believe it. That's what's wrong, don't you understand? He thinks it doesn't matter to me as much as it does to him. He thinks I just want to forget all about it, whether they catch the man or not. He doesn't say so, but I can tell. And that makes everything rotten; it makes me feel ashamed and guilty all the time. Nothing can change that. Even if they kill the man a hundred times over it'll always be that way!"

"It will not," the doctor said sternly. "Julie, why don't you use your head? Hasn't it dawned on you that Tom is suffering from an even deeper guilt than yours?

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That subconsciously he feels a sense of failure because he didn't protect you from what happened? Now he's reacting like any outraged male. He wants vengeance. He wants the account settled. And, Julie, it's his sense of guilt that's tearing you two apart.

"Do you know what that means, young lady? It means you've got a job to do for yourself. The dirtiest kind of job. When the police nail that man you'll have to identify him, testify against him, face cameras and newspapermen, walk through mobs of brainless people dying to get a close look at you. Yes, it's as bad as all that. You don't realize the excitement this mess has stirred up; you've been kept apart from it so far. But you'll have a chance to see it for yourself very soon. That's your test. If you flinch from it you can probably write off your marriage then and there. That's what you've got to keep in mind, not all that nonsense about things never changing!"

Julie sat there viewing herself from a distance, while the cold in her hands moved up along her arms turning them to gooseflesh. She said, "When I was a little girl I cried if anybody even pointed at me."

"You can't be a little girl all all your life," the doctor said.

When the time came, Julie fortified herself with that thought. Sitting in the official car between Tom and Lieutenant Christensen, shielded from the onlooking world by dark glasses and upturned coat collar, her eyes closed, her teeth set, she repeated it like a private *Hail Mary* over and over—until it became a soothing murmur circling endlessly through her mind.

Lieutenant Christensen said, "The man's a janitor in one of those old apartment houses a few blocks away from your place. A drunk and a degenerate. He's been up on morals charges before, but nothing like this. This time he put himself in a spot he'll never live to crawl away from. Not on grounds of insanity, or anything else. We've got him cold."

You can't be a little girl all your life, Julie thought.

The lieutenant said, "The one thing that stymied us was his alibi. He kept telling us he was on a drunk with this woman of his that night when it happened, and she kept backing up his story. It wasn't easy to get the truth out of her, but we finally did. Turns out she wasn't near him that night. Can you imagine lying for a specimen like that?"

You can't be a little girl all your life, Julie thought.

"We're here, Mrs. Barton," the lieutenant said.

The car had stopped before a side door of the headquarters building, and Tom pushed her through it just ahead of men with cameras

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who swarmed down on her, shouting her name, hammering at the door when it was closed against them. She clutched Tom's hand as the lieutenant led them through long institutional corridors, other men falling into step with them along the way, until they reached another door where Dahl was waiting.

He said, "This whole thing takes just one minute, Mrs. Barton, and we're over our big hurdle. All you have to do is look at the man and tell us yes or no. That's all there is to it. And it's arranged so that he can't possibly see you. You have nothing at all to fear from him. Do you understand that?"

"Yes," Julie said.

Again she sat between Tom and Lieutenant Christensen. The platform before her was brilliantly lighted; everything else was in darkness. Men were all around her in the darkness. They moved restlessly; one of them coughed. The outline of Dahl's sharp profile and narrow shoulders were suddenly etched black against the platform; then it disappeared as he took the seat in front of Julie's. She found that her breathing was becoming increasingly shallow; it was impossible to draw enough air out of the darkness to fill her lungs. She forced herself to breathe deeply, counting as she used to do during gym exercises at school. *In-one-two-three. Out-one-two-three* —

A door slammed nearby. Three men walked onto the platform and stood there facing her. Two of them were uniformed policemen. The third man—the one they flanked—towered over them tall and cadaverous, dressed in a torn sweater and soiled trousers. His face was slack, his huge hand moved back and forth in a vacant gesture across his mouth. Julie tried to take her eyes off that hand and couldn't. Back and forth it went, mesmerizing her with its blind, groping motion.

One of the uniformed policemen held up a piece of paper.

"Charles Brunner," he read loudly. "Age forty-one. Arrests—" and on and on until there was sudden silence. But the hand still went back and forth, growing enormous before her, and Julie knew, quite without concern, that she was going to faint. She swayed forward, her head drooping, and something cold and hard was pressed under her nose. Ammonia fumes stung her nostrils and she twisted away, gasping. When the lieutenant thrust the bottle at her again, she weakly pushed it aside.

"I'm all right," she said.

"But it was a jolt seeing him, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Because you recognized him, didn't you?"

She wondered vaguely if that were why. "I'm not sure."

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Dahl leaned over her. "You can't mean that, Mrs. Barton! You gave me your word you'd know him when you saw him again. Why are you backing out of it now? What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid."

"Yes, you are. You almost passed out when you saw him, didn't you? Because no matter how much you wanted to get him out of your mind your emotions wouldn't let you. Those emotions are telling the truth now, aren't they?"

"I don't know!"

"Then look at him again and see what happens. Go on, take a good look!"

Lieutenant Christensen said, "Mrs. Barton, if you let us down now, you'll go out and tell the newspapermen about it yourself. They've been on us like wolves about this thing, and for once in my life I want them to know what we're up against here!"

Tom's fingers gripped her shoulder. "I don't understand, Julie," he said. "Why don't you come out with it? He is the man isn't he?"

"Yes!" she said, and clapped her hands over her ears to shut out the angry, hateful voices clamoring at her out of the darkness. "Yes! Yes!"

"Thank God," said Lieutenant Christensen.

Then Tom moved. He stood up, something glinting metallically in his hand, and Julie screamed as the man behind her lunged at it. Light suddenly flooded the room. Other men leaped at Tom and chairs clattered over as the struggle eddied around and around him, flowing relentlessly toward the platform. There was no one on it when he was finally borne down to the floor by a crushing weight of bodies.

Two of the men, looking apologetic, pulled him to his feet, but kept their arms tightly locked around his. Another man handed the gun to Lieutenant Christensen, and Tom nodded at it. He was disheveled and breathing hard, but seemed strangely unruffled.

"I'd like that back, if you don't mind," he said.

"I do mind," said the lieutenant. He broke open the gun, tapped the bullets into his hand, and then, to Julie's quivering relief, dropped gun and bullets into his own pocket. "Mr. Barton, you're in a state right now where if I charged you with attempted murder you wouldn't even deny it, would you?"

"No."

"You see what I mean? Now why don't you just cool off and let us handle this job? We've done all right so far, haven't we? And after Mrs. Barton testifies at the trial Brunner is as good as dead, and you can forget all about him." The lieutenant looked at Julie. "That makes sense, doesn't it?" he asked her.

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"Yes," Julie whispered prayerfully.

Tom smiled. "I'd like my gun, if you don't mind."

The lieutenant stood there speechless for the moment, and then laid his hand over the pocket containing the gun as if to assure himself that it was still there. "Some other time," he said with finality.

The men holding Tom released him and he lurched forward and caught at them for support. His face was suddenly deathly pale, but the smile was still fixed on it as he addressed the lieutenant.

"You'd better call a doctor," he said pleasantly. "I think your damn gorillas have broken my leg."

During the time he was in the hospital he was endlessly silent and withdrawn. The day he was brought home at his own insistence, his leg unwieldy in a cast from ankle to knee, Dr. Vaughn had a long talk with him, the two of them alone behind the closed doors of the living-room. The doctor must have expressed himself freely and forcefully. When he had gone, and Julie plucked up the courage to walk into the living-room, she saw her husband regarding her with the look of a man who has had a bitter dose of medicine forced down his throat and hasn't quite decided whether or not it will do him any good.

Then he patted the couch seat beside him. "There's just enough room for you and me and this leg," he said.

She obediently sat down, clasping her hands in her lap.

"Vaughn's been getting some things off his chest," Tom said abruptly. "I'm glad he did. You've been through a rotten experience, Julie, and I haven't been any help at all, have I? All I've done is make it worse. I've been lying to myself about it, too. Telling myself that everything I did since it happened was for your sake, and all along the only thing that really concerned me was my own feelings. Isn't that so?"

"I don't know," Julie said, "and I don't care. It doesn't matter as long as you talk to me about it. That's the only thing I can't stand, not having you talk to me."

"Has it been that bad?"

"Yes."

"But you understand why, don't you? It was something eating away inside of me. But it's gone now, I swear it is. You believe that, don't you, Julie?"

She hesitated. "Yes."

"I can't tell whether you mean it or not behind those dark glasses. Lift them up, and let's see."

Julie lifted the glasses and he gravely studied her face. "I think you do mean it," he said. "A face as pretty as that couldn't possibly tell a lie. But why do you still wear those things? There aren't any marks left."

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She dropped the glasses into place and the world became its soothingly familiar, shaded self again. "I just like them," she said. "I'm used to them."

"Well, if the doctor doesn't mind, I don't. But if you're wearing them to make yourself look exotic and dangerous, you'll have to give up. You're too much like Sweet Alice. You can't escape it."

She smiled. "I don't tremble with fear at your frown. Not really."

"Yes, you do, but I like it. You're exactly what Sweet Alice must have been. Demure, that's the word, demure. My wife is the only demure married woman in the world. Yielding, yet cool and remote. A lovely lady wrapped in cellophane. How is it you never became a nun?"

She knew she must be visibly glowing with happiness. It had been so long since she had seen him in this mood. "I almost did. When I was in school I used to think about it a lot. There was this other girl—well, she was really a wonderful person, and she had already made up her mind about it. I guess that's where I got the idea."

"And then what happened?"

"You know what happened."

"Yes, it's all coming back now. You went to your first Country Club dance dressed in a beautiful white gown, with stardust in your hair—"

"It was sequins."

"No, stardust. And I saw you. And the next thing I remember, we were in Mexico on a honeymoon." He put his arm around her waist, and she relaxed in the hard circle of it. "Julie, when this whole bad dream is over we're going there again. We'll pack the car and go south of the border and forget everything. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, very much." She looked up at him hopefully, her head back against his shoulder. "But no bullfights, please. Not this time."

He laughed. "All right, when I'm at the bullfights you'll be sightseeing. The rest of the time we'll be together. Any time I look around I want to see you there. No more than this far away. That means I can reach out my hand and you'll always be there. Is that clear?"

"I'll be there," she said.

So she had found him again, she assured herself, and she used that knowledge to settle her qualms whenever she thought of Brunner and the impending trial. She never mentioned these occasional thoughts to Tom, and she came to see that there was a conspiracy among everyone who entered the house—her family and friends, the doctor, even strangers on business with Tom—which barred any reference to the subject of Brunner. Until one evening when, after she had coaxed Tom

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into a restless sleep, the doorbell rang again and again with maddening persistence.

Julie looked through the peephole and saw that the man standing outside was middle-aged and tired-looking and carried a worn leather portfolio under his arm. She opened the door with annoyance and said, "Please, don't do that. My husband's not well, and he's asleep. And there's nothing we want."

The man walked past her into the foyer before she could stop him. He took off his hat and faced her. "I'm not a salesman, Mrs. Barton. My name is Karlweiss. Dr. Lewis Karlweiss. Is it familiar to you?"

"No."

"It should be. Up to three o'clock this afternoon I was in charge of the City Hospital for Mental Disorders. Right now I'm a man without any job, and with a badly frayed reputation. And just angry enough and scared enough, Mrs. Barton, to want to do something about it. That's why I'm here."

"I don't see what it has to do with me."

"You will. Two years ago Charles Brunner was institutionalized in my care, and, after treatment, released on my say-so. Do you understand now? I am officially responsible for having turned him loose on you. I signed the document which certified that while he was not emotionally well, he was certainly not dangerous. And this afternoon I had that document shoved down my throat by a gang of ignorant politicians who are out to make hay of this case!"

Julie said incredulously, "And you want me to go and tell them they were wrong? Is that it?"

"Only if you know they *are* wrong, Mrs. Barton. I'm not asking you to perjure yourself for me. I don't even know what legal right I have to be here in the first place, and I certainly don't want to get into any more trouble than I'm already in." Karlweiss looked over her shoulder toward the living-room, and shifted his portfolio from one arm to the other. "Can we go inside and sit down while we talk this over? There's a lot to say."

"No."

"All right, then I'll explain it here, and I'll make it short and to the point. Mrs. Barton, I know more about Charles Brunner than anyone else in the world. I know more about him than he knows about himself. And that's what makes it so hard for me to believe that you identified the right man!"

Julie said, "I don't want to hear about it. Will you please go away?"

"No, I will not," Karlweiss said heatedly. "I insist on being heard. You see, Mrs. Barton, everything Brunner does fits a certain pattern. Every dirty little crime he has committed fits that pattern. It's a pattern of weakness, a constant mani-

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festation of his failure to achieve full masculinity.

"But what he is now charged with is the absolute reverse of that pattern. It was a display of brute masculinity by an aggressive and sadistic personality. It was the act of someone who can only obtain emotional and physical release through violence. That's the secret of such a personality—the need for violence. Not lust, as the Victorians used to preach, but the need for release through violence. And that is a need totally alien to Brunner. It doesn't exist in him. It's a sickness, but it's not his sickness!

"Now do you see why your identification of him hit me and my co-workers at the hospital so hard? We don't know too much about various things in our science yet—I'm the first to admit it—but in a few cases we've been able to work out patterns of personality as accurately as mathematical equations. I thought we had done that successfully with Brunner. I would still think so, if you hadn't identified him. That's why I'm here. I wanted to meet you. I wanted to have you tell me directly if there was any doubt at all about Brunner being the man. Because if there is—"

"There isn't."

"But if there is," Karlweiss pleaded, "I'd take my oath that Brunner isn't guilty. It makes sense that way. If there's the shadow of a doubt—"

"There isn't!"

"Julie!" called Tom from the bedroom. "Who is that?"

Panic seized her. All she could envision then was Brunner as he would walk down the prison steps to the street, as he would stand there dazed in the sunlight while Tom, facing him, slowly drew the gun from his pocket. She clutched Karlweiss's sleeve and half-dragged him toward the door. "Please, go away!" she whispered fiercely. "There's nothing to talk about. Please, go away!"

She closed the door behind him and leaned back against it, her knees trembling.

"Julie, who is that?" Tom called. "Who are you talking to?"

She steadied herself and went into the bedroom. "It was a salesman," she said. "He was selling insurance. I told him we didn't want any."

"You know I don't want you to open the door to any strangers," Tom said. "Why'd you go and do a thing like that?"

Julie forced herself to smile. "He was perfectly harmless," she said.

But the terror had taken root in her now—and it thrived. It was fed by many things. The subpoena from Dahl which Tom had her put into his dresser drawer for safekeeping and which was there in full view every time she opened the drawer to get him something.

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The red circle around the trial date on the calendar in the kitchen which a line of black crosses inched toward, a little closer each day. And the picture in her mind's eye which took many forms, but which was always the same picture with the same ending: Brunner descending the prison steps, or Brunner entering the courtroom, or Brunner in the dank cellar she saw as his natural habitat, and then in the end Brunner standing there, blinking stupidly, his hand moving back and forth over his mouth, and Tom facing him, slowly drawing the gun from his pocket, the gun barrel glinting as it moved into line with Brunner's chest—

The picture came into even sharper focus when Dr. Vaughn brought the crutches for Tom. Julie loathed them at sight. She had never minded the heavy pressure of Tom's arm around her shoulders, his weight bearing her down as he lurched from one room to another, hobbled by the cast. The cast was a hobble, she knew, keeping him tied down to the house; he struggled with it and grumbled about it continually, as if the struggling and grumbling would somehow release him from it. But the crutches were a release. They would take him to wherever Brunner was.

She watched him as he practised using the crutches that evening, not walking, but supporting himself on them to find his balance, and then she helped him sit down on the couch, the leg in its cast propped on a footstool before him.

He said, "Julie, you have no idea how fed up a man can get, living in pajamas and a robe. But it won't be long now, will it?"

"No."

"Which reminds me that you ought to give my stuff out to the tailor tomorrow. He's a slow man, and I'd like it all ready when I'm up and around."

"All right," Julie said. She went to the wardrobe in the hall and returned with an armful of clothing which she draped over the back of an armchair. She was mechanically going through the pockets of a jacket when Tom said, "Come here, Julie."

He caught her hand as she stood before him. "There's something on your mind," he said. "What is it?"

"Nothing."

"You were never any good at lying. What's wrong, Julie?"

"Still nothing."

"Oh, all right, if that's the way you want it." He released her hand and she went back to the pile of clothing on the armchair, sick with the feeling that he could see through her, that he knew exactly what she was thinking, and must hate her for it. She put aside the jacket and picked up the car coat he used only for driving. Which meant, she thought with a small shudder of realization, that he

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hadn't worn it since *that* night. She pulled the gloves from its pocket and tossed the coat on top of the jacket.

"These gloves," she said, holding them out to show him. "Where —?"

These gloves, an echo cried out to her. *These gloves,* said a smaller one behind it, and *these gloves, these gloves* ran away in a diminishing series of echoes until there was only deathly silence.

And a glove.

A gray suède glove clotted and crusted with dark-brown stains. Its index finger gouged and torn. Its bitter taste in her mouth. Its owner, a stranger, sitting on the couch, holding out his hand, saying something.

"Give that to me, Julie," Tom said.

She looked at him and knew there were no secrets between them any more. She watched the sweat starting from his forehead and trickling down the bloodless face. She saw his teeth show and his eyes stare as he tried to pull himself to his feet. He failed, and sank back panting.

"Listen to me, Julie," he said. "Now listen to me and take hold of yourself."

"You," she said drunkenly. "It was you."

"Julie, I love you!"

"But it was you. It's all crazy. I don't understand."

"I know. Because it was crazy. That's what it was, I went crazy for a minute. It was overwork. It was that deal. I was killing myself to put it across, and that night when they turned me down I don't know what happened. I got drunk, and when I came home I couldn't find the key. So I came through the window. That's when it happened. I don't know what it was, but it was something exploding in me. Something in my head. I saw you there, and all I wanted to do—I tell you I don't even know why! Don't *ask* me why! It was overwork, that's what it was. It gets to everybody nowadays. You read about it all the time. You know you do, Julie. You've got to be reasonable about this!"

Julie whispered, "If you had told me it was you. If you had only told me. But you didn't."

"Because I love you!"

"No, but you knew how I felt, and you turned that against me. You made me say it was Brunner. Everything you've been doing to me—it was just so I'd say it and say it, until I killed him. You never tried to kill him, at all. You knew I would do it for you. And I would have!"

"Julie, Julie, what does Brunner matter to anybody? You've seen what he's like. He's a degenerate. He's no good. Everybody is better off without people like that around."

She shook her head violently. "But you knew he didn't do it!

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Why couldn't you just let it be one of those times where they never find out who did it?"

"Because I wasn't sure! Everybody kept saying it was only the shock that let you blank it out of your mind. They kept saying if you tried hard enough to remember, it might all come back. So if Brunner—I mean, this way the record was all straight! You wouldn't have to think about it again!"

She saw that if he leaned forward enough he could touch her, and she backed away a step, surprised she had the strength to do it.

"Where are you going?" Tom said. "Don't be a fool, Julie. Nobody'll believe you. Think of everything that's been said and done, and you'll see nobody would even *want* to believe you. They'll say you're out of your mind!"

She wavered, then realized with horror that she was wavering. "They will believe me!" she cried, and ran blindly out of the house, sobbing as she ran, stumbling when she reached the sidewalk so that she fell on her hands and knees, feeling the sting of the scraped knee as she rose and staggered farther down the dark and empty street. It was only when she was at a distance that she stopped, her heart hammering, her legs barely able to support her, to look at the house. Not hers any more. Just his.

He—all of them—had made her a liar and an accomplice. Each of them for his own reason had done that, and she, because of the weakness in her, had let them. It was a terrible weakness, she thought with anguish—the need to have them always approve, the willingness to always say yes to them. It was like hiding yourself behind the dark glasses all the time, not caring that the world you saw through them was never the world you would see through the naked eye.

She turned and fled toward lights and people. The glasses lay in the street where she had flung them, and the night wind swept dust through their shattered frames.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**KEM BENNETT**
TITLE:	***Demon Scientist Strikes Again!***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Robin Walsh
LOCALE:	A School for the Sons of Gentlemen
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*English schools are not at all like the American variety—but aren't schoolboys the same the world over? . . . A tale told with wondrous charm.*

"AND THESE," SAID DR. ADRIAN HUMphreys, headmaster of St. Fimbarrus's School for the Sons of Gentlemen, founded in 1799 by the Duke of Hazlemere and lying about fifty miles from London in a fold of the Sussex hills, "are the science laboratories."

He led the way into the long, low, modern building which formed so great a contrast with Main School above the terraces away to the right. Main School, built with the Duke of Hazlemere's original endowment, was a notable piece of colonnaded Georgian architecture in the Classical taste. It was also the pride and joy of Dr. Humphrey's heart. Being one hundred per cent a Classicist himself, he tended to regard the science laboratories (and the subjects taught in them) with the same tolerant interest that he reserved for the laundry, the rifle range, the Infirmary, and the comfort stations. Functional.

Now he swung open double doors with a hint of a gesture which well suited his stately appearance, and added, "Main Physics lecture room." His visitor, Sir Charles Brockway, Director of the National Chemical Research Institute of Great Britain, and father of Arthur Couderoy Brockway, a small, intelligent boy of thirteen with horn-rimmed spectacles who

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might—or might not—be coming to St. Fimbarrus', grunted.

"As you see," Adrian Humphreys went on, rattling out the patter like an experienced guide to one of the duller cathedrals, "the whole building is splendidly up-to-date and—er—not too ghastly to look at. If I press this button—no, dammit, this one—darkness enshrouds us. The point, I believe, is to assist in the showing of lantern slides and other, more modern demonstrations which I confess I know very little about." An electric motor whirred. Steel shutters slid smoothly across the big skylight. Sir Charles Brockway grunted again.

Adrian Humphreys permitted a small frown of disappointment to crease his tall forehead. "What!" he said. "Not impressed? Pity. Most parents think it's the bee's knees."

Sir Charles Brockway took a pipe out of his large, intelligent pudding of a face. "Just another widgicle," he murmured. "Sorry, Head. Spend my life surrounded by the beastly things. Can't get excited any more."

"Would you prefer to skip the labs and go straight to Main School?" Adrian Humphreys suggested, not without a trace of eagerness in his voice.

"No, no, please carry on. Might as well see the lot while I'm here. Don't think I'm not interested."

"We-ell," said Dr. Humphreys, leading the way along a corridor. "This is the Senior Chemistry Laboratory." He threw open another door and walked, tall, leonine, and magnificent, down an aisle between two long benches littered with experiments set up in glass.

The fourth time his foot touched the floor there was a loud bang.

Dr. Humphreys jumped. As his other foot came down there was an even louder bang.

Half hopping, half running, like a majestically outraged lion on the cat's hot bricks, the Head of St. Fimbarrus' reached the end of the benches to the accompaniment of a crescendo of staccato detonations. He had caught sight of a piece of paper, propped as if meant to be read against a large distillation apparatus; written on it boldly in blue pencil were the words: *The Demon Scientist Strikes Again!*

Dr. Humphreys picked up the piece of paper with an angrily contemptuous movement of his hand. A thread, fastened with sealing wax to the back of it, jerked a beaker, half filled with yellow liquid, off the bench. The beaker smashed on the up-to-date, acid-resisting composition floor and the liquid splashed liberally over Dr. Humphreys' immaculate, gray-striped (but not acid-resisting) trousers. A pungent and terrible smell filled the air and the Headmaster of St. Fimbarrus' stood like a man turned to stone.

Then he walked with calm and rigid dignity back to the door.

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Sir Charles Brockway was bent double, empurpled and helpless with laughter.

Dr. Humphreys waited for him to control himself.

"N-n-nitrogen iodide," Sir Charles gasped. "You . . . can handle it when it's wet, b-but once it's properly dry you . . . you only have to sneeze at it to make it detonate. They . . . they must have sprinkled it on the floor." Sir Charles had another paroxysm of laughter.

"Thank you," said Dr. Humphreys. He bent to look at his trousers. A gust hit him full in the face and he went pale and closed his eyes. "I would be prepared to vow," he said a few seconds later, "that few middle-aged Doctors of Philosophy have ever had their detachment so sorely tried. Would you be so kind as to tell me what is this . . . this diabolical liquid that I have on my trousers?"

"C-c-carbon disulphide," Sir Charles spluttered. "T-terrible smell, isn't it? They use it for filling s-s-stink bombs, among other things. You'll never g-g-get rid of it, I'm afraid. I . . . I'm sorry to be so . . ."

Dr. Humphreys smiled, but by no means broadly. "The basis of humor is accepted to be the banana-skin-and-bishop joke. I'm not a bishop, but I can just see that my predicament fulfils the elemental requirements of a humorous situation. Were our positions reversed, I am sure that I should be splitting my sides . . . Perhaps I had better go and change. Don't hesitate to keep your distance, Sir Charles, for I stink like a polecat."

Half an hour later, changed, and with a glass of whiskey and soda in hand, Adrian Humphreys faced Sir Charles again in the drawing-room of the Headmaster's House. "Since it is half-past midday," he was saying, "I suggest that we leave the rest of our tour of inspection until after luncheon. In the meanwhile, is there anything I can tell you about the school?"

Sir Charles Brockway sat back in his comfortable easy chair and lovingly admired the deep amber color of his drink. "Mm," he said. "Well, Head, there is one thing . . . What about punishments? I was pretty miserable at school myself—always being thrashed for things that seem very silly, looking back—and I'm not keen on my boy having to put up with too much of the same kind of thing."

"For most offenses," Dr. Humphreys answered, "impositions are —er—imposed. A boy on the classical side, for example, who was late or absent for a class would be required to write out a few hundred lines of Virgil, perhaps. Extracts from scientific textbooks are used for the same purpose on the science side of the school. Then again, we employ defaulters on the less popular chores, such as rolling the

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cricket pitch, etcetera. Only for crimes which are considered to be important are boys ever beaten. In this, as in all things. we do our best to be intelligently up-to-date without surrendering to the psychological fad of the moment."

Sir Charles Brockway nodded. A smile spread over his pudgy face and one of his bushy gray eyebrows cocked itself upward. "Just for an example," he suggested, "shall we take the case of The Demon Scientist? If you manage to spot the little devil what'll you do to him?"

Adrian Humphreys looked down at his admirable Persian carpet. "Hmm," he said. "Well . . ." He raised his head. He was smiling; it might almost be said that he was grinning. "I'm afraid that The Demon Scientist, if discovered, will have to pay for fun with discomfort. He will be beaten." A distant look came into Dr. Humphreys' eyes. He sighed. "I shall not beat him myself, however," he said. "I am not sure that I would be able to trust myself not to administer the punishment without feeling some small degree of gratification, so I shall delegate the pleasure . . . I mean the duty to somebody else."

Sir Charles Brockway chuckled.

Dr. Humphreys watched him gravely. "May I take it from that that you approve of our punishment system?"

"Yes, Head. I don't suppose it's worse, or better, than any other."

"Precisely," said Dr. Humphreys. "There goes the bell. Shall we go in to luncheon?"

It was tea-time. Sir Charles Brockway had gone, leaving behind him the promise that Arthur Couderoy Brockway would arrive to taste the joys of the British Public School Educational System as practised at St. Fimbarrus' at the beginning of the following year. As a school, of course, St. Fimbarrus' was about as public as one of the stuffier London clubs, and its fees were sharp, to say the least. But then Sir Charles was an intelligent and practical man and he knew that there was nothing like a good school of St. Fimbarrus' type, with the friendships made there and the snob value of being an Old St. Fimbarrussion, for helping a bright young man to squeeze the last ounce of benefit out of being a citizen of a Welfare State. He went away happy.

Dr. Adrian Humphreys, left behind in his study at the end of the lower Great Corridor of Main School, was not quite so happy. As soon as Sir Charles's shining Daimler had gone singing away over the immaculate gravel of the drive, he sent for Robin Walsh.

Ten minutes later, in answer to the Headmaster's summons, Robin Walsh walked down the lower Great Corridor on his way to the Study. Smaller boys, moving in flocks, like sparrows, and making

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twittering noises, again like sparrows, gave way before him, resisting the temptation to genuflect. Walsh was a Swell, the swellest of the Swells. He was the Head of School, and therefore Head Prefect, responsible to Adrian Humphreys for the maintenance of discipline. He was also Captain of Cricket, Captain of Shooting, Senior Under-Officer of the St. Fimbarrus' Contingent of the Junior Training Corps, etcetera. He was a tall, broad-shouldered, gentle boy of nineteen, by no means stupid, and well aware that the mantle of demi-god in which the traditions of St. Fimbarrus' clothed him would drop from his shoulders like a leaf in autumn as soon as he showed his nose outside the gates for the last time.

He knocked on the Study door.

"Come in," Adrian Humphreys shouted. "Ah, there you are, Robin. Have you heard?"

"Rumor fills the air, sir."

"It does not lie." Dr. Humphreys, hands deep in the pockets of his second-best pair of trousers, stared narrow-eyed at the coming and going of boys on the terraces. He turned. "If I am to be Caesar round here," he said mildly, "and that, I believe, is the intention of the Governors, whom God preserve, then my wounds do indeed cry to heaven for vengeance. I have been made a very smelly mug of, Robin, and I want the dastardly oaf that did it."

"We shall do our best, sir," Robin Walsh murmured, thinking of his staff of a couple of dozen other Prefects, Senior and Junior, known locally as the Secret Police.

"I'm sure you will," Dr. Humphreys acknowledged. Then he shuddered. "That smell! I doubt if I shall ever be able to enjoy a cigar again. The whole thing was devised by a criminal mind, Robin—a subtle, blackguardly criminal mind. Have you any ideas? God forbid that we should be harboring many of his kind."

"One or two notions," Robin Walsh admitted. "It has to be a Scientist, which narrows the field a bit." He stared into the middle distance, coolly frowning as the faces of the school thugs passed one by one before his mind's eye. "Any concrete evidence, sir?"

"This."

Robin took the piece of paper from his Headmaster's hand. He stared at it solemnly. *The Demon Scientist Strikes Again!* He grinned for a split second. "Hmm . . . imposition paper."

Adrian Humphreys nodded; he too had noted that the defiant boast had been written on half a sheet of rather dog-eared paper, obtainable from the School Shop at the price of a halfpenny a sheet, upon which the Law demanded that impositions should be written. "Does that help at all?" he queried.

Robin shrugged, "Probably not, but it gives me an idea."

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"Tell me," said Dr. Humphreys. "I am all ears. High jinks, yes—high explosives, no! In front of a Very Important Parent, too. Heavens above!"

A few minutes later Robin Walsh left the Study and went into the nearby town of Greathampton, having borrowed the Head's car for the purpose. He visited the police station.

After Robin had gone, Dr. Humphreys spent a few more minutes at the window of his study, watching his pupils with loving dislike. Which one, oh, Lord, which one? Then he went back to his house for his tea.

The School lived for twenty-four hours in a state of intense excitement, suppressed laughter, and dire foreboding. Something had to happen. Three hundred and twenty boys and twenty-eight masters yearned to know what.

The following day it was reported that Robin Walsh had again taken the Head's car and gone into Greathampton. He had been seen by the porter's niece's daughter coming out of the police station, of all places! Sensation!

That evening the Chemistry Master was visited in his rooms by Robin. After a few minutes together, the pair were seen to go down to the Staff Common Room. A valiant fourth-form boy who thereupon knocked on the Common Room door and entered without waiting for an answer reported that he found them standing with their heads together over the Impositions Book, in which all minor punishments awarded by masters were supposed to be recorded. It was agreed by all that The Mystery Had Thickened.

The following morning a summons was posted on the School Board. *All boys,* it read, *will assemble in the Main Physics Lecture Room immediately after luncheon. Adrian Humphreys, Headmaster.*

It was a squash to get the entire school into the Lecture Room, but it was managed; nobody, with the exception of one individual, wanted to miss anything. Dr. Humphreys was waiting, gowned and hooded, tall and terrible. Robin Walsh stood beside him. Also present was the Games Master, a thickset and hairy young man called Prosser with a head made of granite and wrists of steel.

Robin Walsh pressed a button. The shutters slid over the skylight and plunged the great room into darkness. There was a pause. Geese walked over three hundred and twenty graves. Someone giggled. Then there was silence. Tension. Awe.

The white beam of the epidiascope, an instrument designed to project images of photographs, maps, etcetera upon a screen, shone out. The image it projected upon the rectangle of white-painted wall

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behind the lecturer's bench was of a piece of paper bearing the words, *The Demon Scientist Strikes Again!* As well, less boldly visible, but quite clear nevertheless, were other words. These covered the entire sheet of paper, starting at the top left-hand corner. *In 1811 Avogadro published his hypothesis on the molecular constitution of gases.* The handwriting was inelegant, but legible. *He asserted that under the same conditions of temperature and volume . . .*

Robin let the image stay on the screen for precisely two minutes before switching off the epidiascope and pressing the button that opened the skylight shutters. Daylight flooded into the room again. He ran his eye along the benches packed with the boys of St. Fimbarrus' until it rested upon a short, jug-eared boy of sixteen with ginger hair, large knobbly hands, and a multitude of freckles. "Bickle," he said. "Please stand up."

Bickle stood up. He was grinning sheepishly, enjoying a brief moment of fame and notoriety with all the fervid desperation of the condemned man eating his last hearty breakfast. Presently he caught sight of Dr. Humphreys' expression and the grin fell off his face as if it were a badly licked postage stamp.

"Did you recognize the words on the piece of paper I have just shown the school?" Robin Walsh asked.

Master Bickle licked his lips. "Yes, Walsh. They were part of Simpkin's *History of Chemistry.*"

"So I understand from Mr. Jones." Mr. Jones was the Chemistry Master. "It might interest you to know that they were revealed, Bickle, by the technicians of the Greathampton Police Laboratory," Walsh went on. "When you were doing your imposition for Mr. Jones you pressed a little too hard. The police were able to trace the indentations that penetrated through to the sheet of paper underneath and to outline them with a mapping pen."

"Yes, Walsh."

"Did you, Bickle, resenting a succession of impositions awarded by Mr. Jones, work out a way of being revenged?"

No answer.

"Did you not, Bickle, prepare nitrogen iodide and sprinkle it on the floor of the Senior Chemistry Lab, and then arrange the piece of paper you have just seen projected in the form of a booby trap, so that anybody picking it up would spill a beakerful of carbon disulphide over himself?"

Pause, then, "Yes, Walsh." Bickle's voice was husky.

"Thank you, Robin," Adrian Humphreys said quietly. "Bickle!"

"Y-yes, sir?"

"I trod on the nitrogen iodide."

"Y-yes, sir . . . I . . . I know y-you did, sir. I d-didn't mean you to, sir."

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"That may be true, boy, but it in no way lessens the enormity, the unspeakable criminality of the offense! It was the act of an unprincipled hooligan, Bickle. It took me a long time to decide not to expel you from the school. I did, in fact, decide that you should be publicly beaten, and never has a punishment been so thoroughly deserved."

"Y-yes, sir."

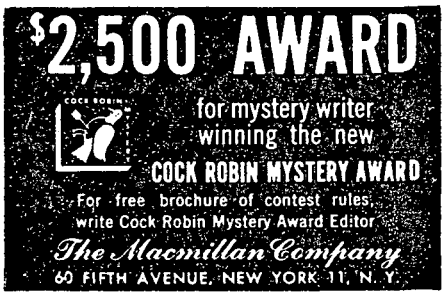
Dr. Humphreys glared. Bickle bowed his head. "I get my trousers from a very expensive tailor," Adrian Humphreys continued in a ringing voice. "The pair that you ruined were hardly worn, Bickle! Estimating their cost when new at twelve guineas, I am going to charge you two less—to wit, ten guineas. You will pay five of these out of your pocket allowance, and I shall put the rest on your bill for your parents to inquire about."

"Yes, sir."

Adrian Humphreys turned to the Games Master. "Mr. Prosser, please oblige me by beating Bickle." His left eyelid drooped with the merest suggestion of a wink which said, 'Sharply, Prosser, but not *too* hard.' Then the headmaster stalked majestically from the room.

Mr. Prosser took off his coat and rolled up his right shirt-sleeve, revealing a forearm like an ape's. Bickle approached the lecturer's bench, very slowly. There were those who swore that they heard a roll of drums in the distance, but this was impossible.

"Sorry, Bickle," Robin Walsh said as the malefactor passed him. "You should have remembered that I'm an avid reader of detective stories. You needn't come to Rowing Practise—er—afterwards, if you see what I mean."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a new story by

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AUTHOR:	**HAROLD Q. MASUR**
TITLE:	***The $2,000,000 Defense***
TYPE:	Legal Detective Story
LOCALE:	New York City
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*In the trial of the State vs. Lloyd Ashley, the State had a solid case: they could prove motive, means, and opportunity . . . Defense attorney Robison would need a brainstorm to save his client . . .*

THE TRIAL HAD GONE WELL FOR the prosecution. Strand by strand, a web of guilt had been woven around the defendant, Lloyd Ashley. Now, late in the afternoon of the fifth day, District Attorney Herrick was tying up the last loose ends with his final witness.

Understandably, the case had made headlines. An avid public kept clamoring for more and more details, and the newspapers obligingly supplied whatever revelations they could find. For all the elements of a *cause célèbre* were present—a beautiful wife, allegedly unfaithful; a dashing Casanova, now dead; and a millionaire husband, charged with murder.

Beside Ashley at the counsel table sat his lawyer, Mark Robison, seemingly unconcerned by the drama unfolding before him. His lean face was relaxed, chin resting on the palm of his hand. To a casual observer he seemed preoccupied, almost disinterested; yet nothing would be further from the truth. Robison's mind was keenly attuned, ready to pounce on any error the district attorney might commit.

Defense counsel was a formidable opponent, as the district attorney well knew—they had both

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trained in the same school, Robison having served as an assistant prosecutor through two administrations. In this capacity he had been tough and relentless, doing more than his share to keep the state prison at Ossining well populated.

As a muskrat takes to water, so Robison found his natural habitat in the courtroom. He had a commanding presence, the ego and voice of a born actor, and the quick, searching brain so essential to a skilled cross-examiner. He had, too, an instinct with jurors. Unerringly he would spot the most impressionable members of a panel, playing on their emotions and prejudices. And so, where his defenses were inadequate, he would often wind up with a hung jury.

But the Ashley case was more serious. Robison's defense was more than inadequate, it was virtually nonexistent.

Robison sat motionless, studying the prosecution's final witness. James Keller, police department, specialist in ballistics, was a pale, heavy-set man, stolid and slow-spoken. District Attorney Herrick had taken him through the preliminaries, qualifying him as an expert, and was now extracting the final bit of testimony that should send Lloyd Ashley to eternity, the whine of a high-voltage electric current pounding in his ears.

The district attorney picked up a squat black pistol whose ownership by the accused had already been established. "And now, Mr. Keller," Herrick said, "I show you State's Exhibit B. Can you tell us what kind of gun this is?"

"Yes, sir. That is a .32 caliber Colt automatic, commonly known as a pocket model."

"Have you ever seen this gun before?"

"Yes, sir, I have."

"Under what circumstances?"

"It was handed to me in the performance of my duties as a ballistics expert to determine whether or not it had fired the fatal bullet."

"And did you make the tests?"

"I did."

"Will you tell the jury what you found."

Keller faced the twelve talesmen who were now leaning forward in their chairs. There were no women in the jury box—Robison had used every available challenge to keep them from being empaneled. It was his theory that men would be more sympathetic to acts of violence by a betrayed husband.

Keller spoke in a dry, somewhat pedantic voice. "I fired a test bullet to compare with the one recovered from the deceased. Both bullets had overall dimensions of three-tenths of an inch and a weight of seventy-four grains, placing them in a .32 caliber class. They both bore the imprint of six spiral grooves with a leftward twist which is characteristic of Colt fire-

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arms. In addition, every gun develops with usage certain personality traits of its own, and all these are impressed on the shell casing as it passes through the barrel. By checking the two bullets with a comparison microscope—"

Robison broke into Keller's monologue with a casual gesture.

"Your Honor, I think we can dispense with a long technical dissertation on the subject of ballistics. The defense concedes that Mr. Ashley's gun fired the fatal bullet."

The judge glanced at Herrick. "Is the prosecution agreeable?"

Grudgingly, Herrick said, "The State has no desire to protract this trial longer than necessary."

Secretly, however, he was not pleased. Herrick preferred to build his case carefully and methodically, laying first the foundation, then each plank in turn, until the lid was finally clamped down, with no loophole for escape and no error that could be reversed on appeal. There were times, of course, when he might welcome a concession by the defense, but with Robison—well, you never knew; the man had to be watched.

When Robison resumed his seat, Lloyd Ashley turned to him, his eyes troubled. "Was that wise, Mark?" With his life at stake, Ashley felt that every point should be hotly contested.

"It was never in dispute," Robison said, managing a smile of assurance.

But the smile had no effect, and seeing Ashley's face now, Robison felt a twist of compassion. How radically changed the man was! Ashley's usual arrogance had crumbled, his sarcastic tongue was now humble and beseeching. Not even his money, those vast sums solidly invested, could give him any sense of security.

Robison could not deny a certain feeling of responsibility for Ashley's plight. He had known Ashley for years, in a business way and socially. He could recall that day only two months ago when Ashley had come to him for advice, grim with repressed anger, suspecting his wife of infidelity.

"Have you any proof?" Robison had asked.

"I don't need any proof. This is something a man knows. She's been cold and untouchable."

"Do you want a divorce?"

"Never." The word had been charged with feeling. "I love Eve."

"Just what do you want me to do, Lloyd?"

"I want you to give me the name of a private detective. I'm sure you know someone I can trust. I'd like him to follow Eve, keep track of her movements. If he can identify the man for me, I'll know what to do."

Yes, Robison knew a reliable private detective—a lawyer sometimes needs the services of a trained investigator, to check the background of hostile witnesses

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whose testimony he might later want to impeach.

So Ashley retained the man and within a week had his report. The detective had trailed Eve Ashley to a rendezvous with Tom Ward, an investment counselor in charge of Ashley's securities. He had watched them in obviously intimate conversations in an obscure cocktail lounge in the Village.

The one thing he had never anticipated, Robison told himself, was violence. Not that Ashley was a coward. But Ashley's principal weapon in the past had been words —sharp, barbed, insulting. When the call came through from Police Headquarters that Ashley was being held for murder, Robison had been genuinely shocked, and he had felt a momentary pang of guilt. But Robison was not the kind of man who would long condemn himself for lack of omniscience. And Ashley, allowed one telephone call, demanded that Robison appear for him.

At the preliminary hearing in Felony Court, Robison had made a quick stab at getting the charge dismissed, presenting Ashley's version with shrewdness and skill. The whole affair had been an accident, Robison had maintained. No premeditation, no malice, no intent to kill. Ashley had gone to Ward's office and drawn his gun, brandishing it, trying to frighten the man, to extract a promise that Ward would stay away from Ashley's wife. He had been especially careful to check the safety catch, not to release it before entering Ward's office.

But instead of suffering paralysis or pleading for mercy, Ward had panicked, thrown himself at Ashley, and grappled for the gun. It had fallen to the desk, Ashley swore, and been accidentally discharged. He had been standing over the body when Ward's secretary found them.

Hearing this version, the district attorney had scoffed, promptly labeling it a bald fiction. The State, Herrick contended, could prove motive, means, and opportunity. So the magistrate had no choice. Lloyd Ashley was bound over for action by the Grand Jury which quickly returned an indictment for murder in the first degree.

And now, in General Sessions, Judge Felix Cobb presiding, on the fifth day of testimony, Herrick was engaged in destroying Ashley's last hope. He held up the gun so that Keller and the jury could see it—a small weapon which had erased a man's life in the twinkling of an eye.

He said, "You are acquainted with the operation of this gun, Mr. Keller, are you not?"

"I am."

"In your opinion as a ballistics expert, could a gun of this type be accidentally discharged—with the safety catch on?"

"No, sir."

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"You're certain of that?"

"Absolutely."

"Could it be discharged—with the safety on—if it were dropped from a height of several feet?"

"It could not."

"If it were slammed down on a hard surface?"

"No, sir."

"In all your experience—twenty years of testing and handling firearms—have you ever heard of any such incident."

"Not one, sir."

Herrick headed back to the prosecution table. "The defense may cross-examine."

"It is now five minutes to four," the judge said. "I think we can recess at this point." He turned to the jury. "You will remember my instructions, gentlemen. You are admonished not to discuss this case among yourselves, and not to permit anyone to discuss it in your presence. Do not form or express any opinions until all the evidence is before you. Court stands adjourned until ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

He straightened his black robes and strode off. Everyone else remained seated until a tipstaff had led the jurors through a side door. A court officer moved up and touched Ashley's shoulder.

Ashley turned to Robison, his face drawn and tired. He had lost considerable weight during these last few weeks and the flaccid skin hung loose under his chin. His sunken eyes were veined and red, and a vagrant muscle kept twitching at the corner of his right temple.

"Tomorrow's the last day, isn't it, Mark?"

"Almost." Robison doubted if the whole defense would require more than a single session. "Except for the summation and the judge's charge."

The guard said, "Let's go, Mr. Ashley."

"Listen, Mark." There was sudden intensity in Ashley's voice. "I've got to talk to you. It—it's absolutely vital."

Robison studied his client. "All right, Lloyd. I'll be up in about fifteen minutes."

Ashley left with the guard and disappeared through a door behind the judge's bench. A few spectators still lingered in the courtroom. Robison gathered his papers and notes, slid them into his brief case. He sat back, fingertips stroking his closed eyelids, still seeing Ashley's face. The man was terrified, and with considerable justification, Robison thought. Despite the judge's admonition to the jurors, advising them not to reach any decision, Robison's experience told him they had done just that.

He could read the signs. He could tell from the way they filed out, the way they averted their eyes, not looking at the defendant. Nobody really enjoys sending another human being to the electric

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chair. Ashley must have felt it too, this sense of doom.

When Robison reached the corridor, he saw Eve Ashley waiting at the south bank of elevators. She seemed small and lost, the very bones of her body cringing against themselves. Robison started forward, but she was swallowed up in the descending throng before he could reach her.

Eve's reaction had surprised him. She was taking it hard, ill with self-condemnation and remorse. He remembered her visit to his office directly after the murder. "I knew he was jealous," she said, her eyes full of pain, "but I never expected anything like this. Never." She kept clasping and unclasping her hands. "Oh, Mark, they'll send him to the chair! I know they will and it's all my fault."

He had spoken to her sharply. "Listen to me. You had no way of knowing. I want you to get hold of yourself. If you go to pieces, you won't be any good to yourself —or to Lloyd. It's not your fault."

"It *is* my fault." Her lips were trembling. "I should have known. Just look what I've done. Two men. Tom is already dead, and Lloyd soon will—"

"Now stop that!" He had gripped her shoulders.

"You must get him off," she cried fiercely. "Please, Mark. If you don't I'll never forgive myself."

"I'll do my best."

But he knew the odds. The State had a solid case. Motive, means, and opportunity . . .

The elevator took him down and he went around to the detention cells at the White Street entrance. After the usual routine he gained admittance to the counsel room, and a moment later Lloyd Ashley was brought in. They sat on opposite sides of the table, the board between them.

"All right, Mark." Ashley's clenched hands rested on the table. "I want the truth. How does it look?"

Robison shrugged. "The case isn't over. Nobody can tell what a jury will do."

"Stop kidding, Mark. I saw those men—I saw their faces."

Robison shrugged again.

"Look, Mark, you've been my lawyer for a long time. We've been through a lot of deals together. I've seen you operate. I know how your mind works. You're smart. You're resourceful. I have the utmost respect for your ability, but I—well, I . . ." He groped for words.

"Aren't you satisfied with the way I'm handling your defense?"

"I didn't say that, Mark."

"Don't you think I'm exploiting every possible angle?"

"Within legal limitations, yes. But I've seen you try cases before. I've watched you handle juries. And I've seen you pull some rabbits out of a hat. Now, all of a

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sudden, you're so damn scrupulous I hardly recognize the same man. Why, Mark? What's happened?"

"I can't find a single loophole, Lloyd, that's why. Not one crack in the State's case. My hands are tied."

"Untie them."

"How?" Robison asked quietly.

"Listen, Mark"—Ashley's fingers were gripping the edge of the table—"you know almost as much about my financial affairs as I do. You know how much money I inherited, how much I've made. As of now, I'm worth about four million dollars." He compressed his lips. "Maybe that's why Eve married me; I don't know. Anyway, it's a lot of loot and I'd like a chance to spend some of it. But I won't have that chance, not if they convict me."

Ashley moistened his lips, then went on: "Dead, the money will do me no good. Alive, I can do all I want to do on a lot less. If anybody can get me off the hook, even at this stage of the game, it's you. I don't know how, but I have a feeling—hunch, intuition, call it what you will. You can think of *something*. You've got the imagination. I know you can pull it off."

Robison felt a stir of excitement.

Ashley leaned forward. "Down the middle," he said, his voice hoarse. "An even split, Mark, of everything I own. Half for you, half for me. A two-million-dollar fee, Mark. You'll be financially independent for life. Just figure out an angle! I want an acquittal."

Robison said promptly, "Will you put that in writing, Lloyd?"

"Of course!"

Robison took a blank sheet of paper from his brief case. He wrote swiftly, in clear unmistakable language. He passed the paper to Ashley who scanned it briefly, reached for the pen, and scratched his signature. Robison, his fingers a trifle unsteady, folded the document and put it away.

"Have you any ideas, Mark?"

The lawyer sat motionless, his flat-cheeked face devoid of expression. He did have an idea, one that was not entirely new to him. He remembered, three nights ago, sitting bolt upright in bed, when the brainstorm suddenly struck him. He had considered the idea for a moment, weighed its possibilities, then putting his head back he had laughed aloud in the darkness.

It was ingenious, even amusing in a macabre way, but nothing he would actually use. Now, abruptly, his thinking had changed, all scruples gone. There was considerable persuasive power in a fee of $2,000,000. Men had committed serious crimes—including murder—for much less.

Now the possibilities of his idea stood out, sharp and clear and daring. There was no guarantee of success. He would have to cope with certain imponderables—most

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of them in the minds of twelve men, the twelve men in the jury box.

"Leave it to me," Robison said, standing abruptly. "Relax, Lloyd. Try to get some sleep tonight." He swung toward the door with a peremptory wave at the guard.

The declining sun had cooled the air, and Robison walked briskly, details of the plan churning in his mind. Ethical? He would hardly call it that. But then Robison was not often troubled by delicate moral considerations. As a trial lawyer he'd been consistently successful. His voice was a great asset: it could be gentle and sympathetic or blistering and contemptuous. Neophytes around the Criminal Courts Building still talked about Robison's last case as an assistant district attorney, remembering his savage cross-examination of the defendant, a man accused of armed robbery. He had won a conviction, and upon pronouncement of a maximum sentence, the enraged defendant had turned on him, swearing revenge. Later he had received venomous, threatening letters from the man's relatives.

So Mark Robison had acquired a pistol permit. And each year he had had it renewed. He always carried the permit in his wallet.

His first stop was on Centre Street, not far from Police Headquarters—at a small shop that specialized in firearms. He examined the stock, carefully selected a Colt automatic, pocket model, caliber .32, and a box of shells. The proprietor checked his permit and wrapped the package.

Robison then took a cab to his office. His secretary, Miss Graham, paused in her typing to hand him a list of calls. Seeing the abstracted look on his face, she did not bother to ask him about the trial. He went on through to the inner room.

It had recently been refurnished and Robison was pleased with the effect. Hanging on the far wall, facing the desk, was a picture of the nine Justices of the United States Supreme Court. The extraordinary occurrence that now took place before these venerable gentlemen was probably unparalleled in all their collective histories.

Mark Robison unwrapped his package and balanced the gun for a moment in his hand. Then, without further hesitation, he inserted three bullets into the clip and rammed the clip into the butt. His jaw was set as he lifted the gun, aimed it at his left arm, slightly above the elbow, and pulled the trigger.

The echoing explosion left his ears ringing. Robison was no stoic. He felt the stab of pain, like a branding iron, and cried out. The next instant he gritted his teeth while his thumb reached for the safety catch and locked it into position.

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A moment later the door burst open and Miss Graham's apprehensive face poked through. With sudden dismay she saw Robison's pallor and the widening stain on his sleeve. She stifled a scream.

"All right," Robison told her harshly. "It was an accident. Don't stand there gaping. Call a doctor. There's one down the hall."

Miss Graham fled. Her urgent story stopped whatever the doctor was doing and brought him on the double with his rumpled black bag.

"Well," he said, sparing the gun a brief look of distaste, "what have we here, another one of those didn't-know-it-was-loaded accidents?"

"Not quite," Robison said dryly.

"Here, let's get the coat off." The doctor helped him, then ripped the lawyer's shirt sleeve from cuff to shoulder, exposing the wound, and probed the inflamed area. The bullet had scooped out a shallow trench of flesh.

"Hmm," said the doctor. "Looks worse than it is. You're a lucky man, counselor. No muscles or arteries severed. Loss of tissue, yes, and some impairment of articulation—"

He reached into his bag and brought out some antiseptic. It burned Robison's arm like a flame. Then having dressed and bandaged the wound, the doctor stepped back to appraise his handiwork.

He looked faintly apologetic. "You know the law, counselor. Whenever a doctor is called in for the treatment of a gunshot wound, he is required to notify the police. I really have no choice."

Robison repressed a smile. Had the doctor been ignorant of the law, Robison would have immediately enlightened him. Most assuredly he *wanted* the police here. They were an essential part of his plan.

He could already picture the headlines: *Robison Accidentally Wounded. Defense Counsel Shot Making Test*—and the stories telling how he had tried to simulate the conditions that had existed in Tom Ward's office—by deliberately dropping a gun on his desk . . .

Promptly at ten o'clock the following morning a court officer arose in Part III and intoned the ritual. "All rise, the Honorable Judge of the Court of General Sessions in and for the County of New York."

A door behind the bench opened and Justice Cobb emerged briskly, his black robe billowing behind him.

"Be seated, please," the attendant said, tapping his gavel. "This court is now in session."

The judge looked curiously at Robison, eyeing the wounded arm supported by a black-silk sling knotted around the lawyer's neck. "Call the witness," he said. James

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Keller was duly sworn and resumed his seat on the stand.

The twelve jurors bent forward, stirred by excitement and anticipation. District Attorney Herrick sat at the prosecution table, vigilant, wary. Robison smiled to himself, remembering the district attorney's tight-lipped greeting. Did Herrick suspect? Possibly.

"The defense may cross-examine," Judge Cobb said.

There was a murmur from the spectators as Robison pushed erect. He half turned, letting everyone have a look at his wounded arm in its silken cradle. He saw Eve Ashley in the first row, her eyes eloquent with appeal.

Robison walked to the clerk's table and picked up Ashley's gun. Holding it, he advanced toward Keller and addressed the witness. "Now, Mr. Keller, if I remember correctly, you testified yesterday that you fired a test bullet from this gun, did you not?"

"Yes, sir, I did." Keller's tone was guarded.

"You wanted to prove that this gun and no other fired the fatal bullet."

"That is correct."

"I assume that you released the safety catch before making the test?"

"Naturally. Otherwise I would still be standing there in my laboratory pulling the trigger."

Someone in the courtroom tittered, and one of Herrick's assistants grinned. Keller's self-confidence mounted visibly.

Robison regarded him sternly. "This is hardly a moment for humor, Mr. Keller. You realize that your testimony may send an innocent man to the chair?"

Herrick's hand shot up. "I move that last remark be stricken."

"Yes," said the judge. "It will be stricken and the jury will disregard it."

"Then you're absolutely sure," Robison said, "that the safety catch must be released before the gun can be fired?"

"Positive."

"Are you equally positive that the safety catch on a gun of this type cannot be joggled loose under certain circumstances?"

Keller hesitated. "Well, yes, to the best of my knowledge."

"Have you ever made any such test?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did you ever load this gun—State's Exhibit B—and try dropping it on a hard surface?"

"I—I'm afraid not, sir."

"Even though you knew what the basis of our defense would be?"

Keller shifted uncomfortably and glanced at Herrick, but he found no help in the district attorney's expressionless face.

"Please answer the question." Robison's voice was no longer friendly.

"No, sir. I did not."

"Why, Mr. Keller? Why didn't

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you make such a test? Wouldn't it seem the obvious thing to do? Were you afraid it might confirm the defendant's story?"

"No, sir, not at all."

"Then why?"

Keller said lamely, "It just never occurred to me."

"It never occurred to you. I see. A man is accused of first degree murder; he is being tried for his life, facing the electric chair, and it never occurred to you to make that one simple test to find out if he might be telling the truth.

A flush rose from Keller's neck up to his cheeks. He sat silent, squirming in the witness chair.

"Let the record note that the witness did not answer," Robison said. "Now, sir, you testified yesterday that a gun of this type could never be discharged by dropping it on a hard surface, did you not?"

"With the safety catch on."

"Of course."

"I—yes, I believe I did."

"There is no doubt in your mind?"

Keller swallowed uncomfortably, glancing at Robison's arm. "Well . . . no."

"Let us see." Robison transferred the gun to his left hand, jutting out of the sling, its fingers slightly swollen. His right hand produced a .32 caliber shell from the pocket of his coat. His movements were awkward as he loaded the gun and jacked a shell into firing position. He stepped closer to the witness and started to offer the gun with his left hand, but he stopped short with a sudden grimace of pain. The expression was telling and dramatic. Then ruefully he shifted the gun to his right hand and extended it to the witness.

In distinct, deliberate tones he said, "Now, Mr. Keller, will you please look at the safety device on State's Exhibit B and tell us if it is in the proper position to prevent firing?"

"It is."

"Then will you kindly rise, sir? I would like you to prove to his Honor, and to these twelve jurors, and to the spectators in this courtroom, that the gun in question *cannot possibly be discharged by dropping it on the judge's dais.* Just lift it, if you please, or slap it down."

A murmur rustled through the courtroom as Herrick landed on both feet in front of the bench. The muscles around his jaw were contracted with anger. "I object, your Honor, This is highly irregular, a cheap grandstand play, inherently dangerous to every—" He caught himself, swallowing the rest of his sentence. His own words, uttered impulsively, had implied a possibility, however remote, that the gun might go off.

In contrast, Robison sounded calm and reasonable. "If it please the court, this witness made a state-

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ment under oath as a qualified expert. I am merely asking him to prove his own expert statement."

Judge Cobb spoke without pleasure. "Objection overruled."

"Go ahead, if you please, Mr. Keller," Robison said. "Demonstrate to the court and to the jury that State's Exhibit B could not *possibly* have been fired in the manner claimed by the defendant."

A hush fell over the courtroom as Keller rose. He lifted the gun slowly, and held it suspended over the bench, his face a mixture of anxiety and misgiving.

Robison held his breath as Keller's arm twitched. The judge, trying to look inconspicuous, started to slide down his chair, as if to minimize himself as a target.

"We're waiting," Robison said softly, clearly.

Beads of moisture formed along Keller's temples. Had he flexed his muscles? Had he lifted the gun a little higher? No one in the courtroom could be sure.

"Please proceed, Mr. Keller," Robison said, sharply now. "The court hasn't got all day."

Their eyes met and locked. Deliberately Robison rearranged his sling. Keller took a long breath, then without warning he dropped back into his seat. The gun hung loose between his knees.

A sigh of relief swelled in the courtroom.

The verdict, everyone conceded, was a foregone conclusion. Robison's closing speech was a model of forensic law, and the judge, charging the jury to be satisfied beyond a reasonable doubt, left them little choice. They were out for less than an hour before returning a verdict of Not Guilty.

Lloyd Ashley showed no jubilation—the strain had left him on the edge of nervous exhaustion. Robison touched his shoulder.

"All right, Lloyd. It's over. You're free now. Let's go back to my office. I believe we have some business to transact."

Ashley roused himself. "Yes, of course," he said with a stiff smile.

They got through the crowd, and hailed a cab. The closing speeches and the judge's charge had taken all afternoon, so it was growing dark when they reached Robison's office. He ushered the way into his private room and snapped on the light.

By way of celebration the lawyer produced a bottle and poured two drinks. Both men emptied their glasses in single gulps. Robison passed the humidor and snapped a lighter for his client. Ashley settled back, inhaling the rich smoke of a long, thin cigar.

"Well, Mark," he said, "I knew you could do it. You performed your share of the bargain. I suppose now you'd like me to fulfill mine."

Robison made a deprecating gesture.

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"Have you a blank check?"

There was a pad of blank checks somewhere in the outer office, Robison knew. He kept it handy for clients who needed legal representation but who came to him with insufficient funds. He went out to the reception room, rummaged through a storage cabinet, and finally located the pad.

Lloyd Ashley had shifted chairs and was now seated behind Robison's desk. He accepted the blank check and Robison's pen. Without flicking an eyelash, he wrote out a check for $2,000,000.

"I said fifty-fifty, Mark. There may even be more coming to you. We'll know after my accountant goes over the books."

Robison held the check, his eyes transfixed by the string of figures. There was a faint throbbing in his wounded arm, but he didn't mind. Ashley's voice came back to him, sounding soft and strange.

"Oh, yes, Mark, there's more coming to you. Perhaps I can arrange to let you have it now."

Robison looked up and saw the .32 caliber automatic in Ashley's hand, his thumb on the safety catch.

"I found this in your desk," Ashley said. "It must be the gun you used last night. Ironic, isn't it, Mark? You now have the one thing that means more to you than anything else in this world—money—and you'll never be able to spend a penny of it."

Robison did not like the look in Ashley's eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Remember that private detective you recommended? Funny thing, after that trouble with Ward I never had a chance to take him off the case. So he kept watching Eve all the time I was in jail. As a matter of fact, he brought me a report only two days ago. I don't suppose I have to tell you about it—who she's been seeing, who the other man really is."

Robison had gone white.

The gun in Ashley's hand was very steady. "You know, Mark, I feel you're almost as responsible for Ward's death as I am. After all, who persuaded Eve to use him as a decoy, so that you and she could be safe? It must have been you. Eve never had that much imagination."

Perspiration now bathed Robison's face and his voice went down to a whisper. "Wait, Lloyd, listen to me—"

"No, I'd rather not. You're too good at winning people over. I saw a demonstration of your powers in court today, remember? I've been planning on this for two days. Finding your gun merely accelerated the timetable. There's a kind of justice in this, I think. You forced me into killing the wrong man. Now I see no reason why I shouldn't kill the right one."

Of the two shots that rang out, Mark Robison heard only the first.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JACK LONDON**

TITLE: ***The Devil-Dog***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Sunrise, Alaska

TIME: Early 20th Century

COMMENTS: *About a man and a dog—the two subjects Jack London perhaps knew best . . . In this case, however, both the man and the dog were "acute in knavery, overspilling with hate, sinister, malignant, and diabolical."*

BÂTARD WAS A DEVIL. THIS WAS recognized throughout the Northland. "Hell's Spawn" he was called by many men, but his master, Black Leclère, chose for him the shameful name "Bâtard."

Now Black Leclère was also a devil, and the twain were well matched. There is a saying that when two devils come together, hell is to pay. This is to be expected, and this certainly was to be expected when Bâtard and Black Leclère came together. The first time they met, Bâtard was a part-grown puppy, lean and hungry, with bitter eyes; and they met with snap and snarl and wicked looks, for Leclère's upper lip had a wolfish way of lifting and showing the white, cruel teeth. And it lifted then, and his eyes glinted viciously as he reached for Bâtard and dragged him out from the squirming litter. It was certain that they divined each other, for on the instant Bâtard had buried his puppy fangs in Leclère's hand, and Leclère, with thumb and finger, was coolly choking his young life out of him.

"Sacredam," the Frenchman said softly, flirting the quick blood from his bitten hand and gazing down on the little puppy choking and gasping in the snow.

Leclère turned to John Hamlin, storekeeper of the Sixty Mile Post.

From THE FAITH OF MEN AND OTHER STORIES, *originally titled "Bâtard";*
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"Dat fo' w'at Ah lak heem. 'Ow moch, eh, you, *M'sieu'?* 'Ow moch? Ah buy heem, now—Ah buy heem queek."

And because he hated him with an exceeding bitter hate, Leclère bought Bâtard and gave him his shameful name. And for five years the twain adventured across the Northland, from St. Michael's and the Yukon delta to the head reaches of the Pelly and even so far as the Peace River, Athabasca, and the Great Slave. And they acquired a reputation for uncompromising wickedness, the like of which never before attached itself to man and dog.

Bâtard did not know his father—hence his name—but, as John Hamlin knew, his father was a great gray timber wolf. But the mother of Bâtard, as he dimly remembered her, was snarling, bickering, husky, full-fronted, and heavy-chested, with a malign eye, a catlike grip on life, and a genius for trickery and evil. There was neither faith nor trust in her. Her treachery alone could be relied upon, and her wildwood amours attested her general depravity. Much of evil and much of strength were there in these, Bâtard's progenitors, and, bone and flesh of their bone and flesh, he had inherited it all. And then came Black Leclère, to lay his heavy hand on the bit of pulsating puppy life, to press and prod and mould till it became a big bristling beast, acute in knavery, overspilling with hate, sinister, malignant and diabolical. With a proper master Bâtard might have made an ordinary, fairly efficient sled-dog. He never got the chance: Leclère but confirmed him in his congenital iniquity.

The history of Bâtard and Leclère is a history of war—of five cruel, relentless years, of which their first meeting is fit summary. To begin with, it was Leclère's fault, for he hated with understanding and intelligence, while the long-legged, ungainly puppy hated only blindly, instinctively, without reason or method. At first there were no refinements of cruelty (these were to come later), but simple beatings and crude brutalities. In one of these Bâtard had an ear injured. He never regained control of the riven muscles, and ever after the ear drooped limply down to keep keen the memory of his tormentor. And he never forgot.

His puppyhood was a period of foolish rebellion. He was always worsted, but he fought back because it was his nature to fight back. And he was unconquerable. Yelping shrilly from the pain of lash and club, he none the less contrived always to throw in the defiant snarl, the bitter vindictive menace of his soul which fetched without fail more blows and beatings. But his was his mother's tenacious grip on life. Nothing could

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kill him. He flourished under misfortune, grew fat with famine, and out of his terrible struggle for life developed a preternatural intelligence. His were the stealth and cunning of the husky, his mother, and the fierceness and valor of the wolf, his father.

Possibly it was because of his father that he never wailed. His puppy yelps passed with his lanky legs, so that he became grim and taciturn, quick to strike, slow to warn. He answered curse with snarl, and blow with snap, grinning the while his implacable hatred; but never again, under the extremest agony, did Leclère bring from him the cry of fear nor of pain. This unconquerableness merely fanned Leclère's wrath and stirred him to greater deviltries.

Men and dogs looked askance at Bâtard when he drifted into their camps and posts. The men greeted him with feet threateningly lifted for the kick, the dogs with bristling manes and bared fangs. Once a man did kick Bâtard, and Bâtard, with quick wolf snap, closed his jaws like a steel trap on the man's calf and crunched down to the bone. Whereat the man was determined to have his life, only Black Leclère, with ominous eyes and naked hunting-knife, stepped in between. The killing of Bâtard —ah, *sacredam*, that was a pleasure Leclère reserved for himself.

They had become problems to each other. The very breath each drew was a challenge and a menace to the other. Their hate bound them together as love could never bind. Leclère was bent on the coming of the day when Bâtard should wilt in spirit, and cringe and whimper at his feet. And Bâtard—Leclère knew what was in Bâtard's mind, and more than once had read it in Bâtard's eyes. And so clearly had he read that when Bâtard was at his back he made it a point to glance often over his shoulder.

Men marveled when Leclère refused large sums of money for the dog. "Some day you'll kill him and be out his price," said John Hamlin once, when Bâtard lay panting in the snow where Leclère had kicked him, and no one knew whether his ribs were broken, and no one dared look to see.

"Dat," said Leclère, dryly, "dat is my biz'ness, *M'sieu'*."

And the men marveled that Bâtard did not run away. They did not understand. But Leclère understood. To him Bâtard spoke clear and direct. Full well he understood why Bâtard did not run away, and he glanced more often over his shoulder.

When in anger, Bâtard was not nice to look upon, and more than once had he leaped for Leclère's throat, only to be stretched quivering and senseless in the snow by the butt of the ever ready dog-whip. And so Bâtard learned to bide his time. When he reached

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his full strength and prime of youth, he thought the time had come. He was broad-chested, powerfully muscled, of far more than ordinary size, and his neck from head to shoulders was a mass of bristling hair—to all appearances a full-blooded wolf. Leclère was lying asleep in his furs. Bâtard crept upon him stealthily, head low to earth and lone ear laid back, with a feline softness of tread. Bâtard breathed gently, very gently and not till he was close did he raise his head. He paused for a moment and looked at the bronzed bull-throat, naked and knotty, swelling to a deep and steady pulse. The slaver dripped down his fangs and slid off his tongue at the sight. Without a sound he sprang on the sleeping man.

Leclère awoke to the fangs in his throat; and, perfect animal that he was, he awoke clear-headed and with full comprehension. He closed on Bâtard's windpipe with both his hands and rolled out of his furs to get his weight uppermost. But thousands of Bâtard's ancestors had clung at the throats of unnumbered moose and caribou and dragged them down, and the wisdom of those ancestors was his. When Leclère's weight came on top of him, he drove his hind legs upward and in, and clawed down chest and abdomen, ripping and tearing through skin and muscle. And when he felt the man's body wince above him and lift, he worried and shook at the man's throat. His team-mates closed around in a snarling circle. Bâtard, with failing breath and fading sense, knew that their jaws were hungry for him. But that did not matter—it was the man, the man above him, and he ripped and clawed and shook and worried to the last ounce of his strength. But Leclère choked him with both his hands till Bâtard's chest heaved and writhed for the air denied to him, and his eyes glazed and set, his jaws slowly loosened, and his tongue protruded black and swollen.

"Eh? *Bon,* you devil!" Leclère gurgled, mouth and throat clogged with his own blood, as he shoved the dizzy dog from him.

And then Leclère cursed the other dogs off as they fell upon Bâtard. They drew back into a wider circle, squatting alertly on their haunches and licking their chops, the hair on every neck bristling and erect.

Bâtard recovered quickly. He tottered to his feet and swayed weakly back and forth.

"A-a-ah! You beeg devil!" Leclère spluttered. "Ah fix you —Ah fix you plentee, by Gar!"

Bâtard, the air biting into his exhausted lungs like wine, flashed full into the man's face, his jaws missing and coming together with a metallic clip. They rolled over and over on the snow, Leclère striking madly with his fists. Then

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they separated, face to face, and circled back and forth before each other. Leclère could have drawn his knife. His rifle was at his feet. But the beast in him was up and raging. He would do the thing with his hands—and his teeth. Bâtard sprang in. Leclère knocked him over with a blow of the fist, fell upon him, and buried his teeth to the bone in the dog's shoulder. Then Leclère leaped upon the wolf-dog with his feet, and sprang up and down, striving to grind him into the earth. Both Bâtard's hind legs were broken before Leclère stopped for breath.

"A-a-ah! A-a-ah!" Leclère screamed, incapable of speech, shaking his fist, through sheer impotence of throat and larynx.

But Bâtard was indomitable. He lay there in a helpless welter, his lip feebly lifting and writhing to the snarl he had not the strength to utter. Leclère kicked him again, and the tired jaws closed on the ankle, but could not break the skin.

Then Leclère picked up the whip and proceeded almost to cut Bâtard to pieces, at each stroke of the lash crying: "Dis taim Ah break you! Eh? By Gar, Ah break you!"

In the end, exhausted, fainting from loss of blood, he crumpled and fell by his victim. But when the wolf-dogs closed in to take their vengeance, Leclère with his last consciousness dragged his body over Bâtard's to shield him.

This occurred not far from Sunrise, and the missionary, opening the door to Leclère a few hours later, was surprised to note the absence of Bâtard from the team. Nor did his surprise lessen when Leclère threw back the robes from the sled, gathered Bâtard into his arms, and staggered across the threshold. It happened that the surgeon of McQuestion, who was something of a gadabout, was up on a gossip, and between them they proceeded to repair Leclère.

"*Merci, non,*" he said. "Do you fix firs' de dog. To die? *Non*. Eet is not good. Becos' heem Ah mus' yet break. Dat fo' w'at he mus' not die."

The surgeon called it a marvel, the missionary a miracle, that Leclère pulled through at all; and so weakened was he that in the spring the fever got him, and he went on his back again. Bâtard had been in even worse plight, but his grip on life prevailed, and the bones of his hind legs knit, and his organs righted themselves, during the several weeks he lay strapped to the floor. By the time Leclère, finally convalescent, sallow and shaky, took the sun by the cabin door, Bâtard had reasserted his supremacy among his kind, and brought not only his own team-mates but the missionary's dogs into subjection.

He moved never a muscle, nor twitched a hair, when for the first time Leclère tottered out on the

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missionary's arm, and sank with infinite caution onto the stool.

"*Bon!*" he said. "*Bon!* De good sun!" And he stretched out his wasted hands and washed them in the warmth.

Then his gaze fell on the dog, and the old light blazed back in his eyes. He touched the missionary lightly on the arm. "*Mon père,* dat is one beeg devil, dat Bâtard. You will bring me one pistol, so, dat Ah drink de sun in peace."

And thenceforth for many days he sat in the sun before the cabin door. He never dozed, and the pistol lay always across his knees. Bâtard had a way, the first thing each day, of looking for the weapon in its wonted place. At sight of it he would lift his lip faintly in token that he understood, and Leclère would lift his own lip in an answering grin. One day the missionary took note of the trick.

"Bless me!" he said. "I really believe the brute comprehends."

Leclère laughed softly. "Look you, *mon père.* Dat w'at Ah now spik, to dat does he lissen."

As if in confirmation, Bâtard just perceptibly wriggled his lone ear up to catch the sound.

"Ah say 'keel.'"

Bâtard growled deep down in his throat, the hair bristled along his neck, and every muscle went tense and expectant.

"Ah lift de gun, so, like dat." And suiting action to word, he sighted the pistol at Bâtard.

Bâtard, with a single leap sideways, landed around the corner of the cabin out of sight.

"Bless me!" the missionary repeated at intervals.

Leclère grinned proudly.

"But why does he not run away?"

The Frenchman's shoulders went up in the racial shrug that means all things from total ignorance to infinite understanding.

"Then why do you not kill him?"

Again the shoulders went up.

"*Mon père,*" he said after a pause, "de taim is not yet. He is one beeg devil. Some taim Ah break heem, so, an' so, all to leetle bits. Hey? Some taim. *Bon!*"

A day came when Leclère gathered his dogs together and floated down in a bateau to Forty Mile, and on to the Porcupine where he took a commission from the P. C. Company and went exploring for the better part of a year. After that he poled up the Koyokuk to deserted Arctic City, and later came drifting back, from camp to camp, along the Yukon. And during the long months Bâtard was well lessoned. He learned many tortures, notably the torture of hunger, the torture of thirst, the torture of fire and, worst of all, the torture of music.

Like the rest of his kind, he did not enjoy music. It gave him exquisite anguish, racking him nerve by nerve, and ripping apart every

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fibre of his being. Leclère, on the other hand, passionately loved music—as passionately as he loved strong drink. And when his soul clamored for expression, it usually uttered itself in one or the other of the two ways, and more usually in both. And when he had drunk, his brain a-lilt with unsung song and the devil in him aroused and rampant, his soul found its supreme utterance in torturing Bâtard.

"Now we will haf a leetle museek," he would say. "Eh? W'at you t'ink, Bâtard?"

It was only an old and battered harmonica, tenderly treasured and patiently repaired; but out of its silver reeds he drew weird vagrant airs. Then Bâtard, dumb of throat, with teeth tight clenched, would back away, inch by inch, to the farthest cabin corner. And Leclère, playing, playing, a stout club tucked under his arm, followed the animal up, inch by inch, step by step, till there was no further retreat.

At first Bâtard would crowd himself into the smallest possible space, groveling close to the floor; but as the music came nearer and nearer, he was forced to uprear, his back jammed into the logs, his forelegs fanning the air as though to beat off the rippling waves of sound. He still kept his teeth together, but severe muscular contractions attacked his body till he was all aquiver and writhing in silent torment. As he lost control, his jaws spasmodically wrenched apart, and deep throaty vibrations issued forth, too low in the register of sound for human ear to catch. And then, nostrils distended, eyes dilated, hair bristling in helpless rage, arose the long wolf howl. It came with a slurring rush upward, swelling to a great heart-breaking burst of sound, and dying away in sadly cadenced woe—then the next rush upward, octave upon octave; the bursting heart; and the infinite sorrow and misery, fainting, fading, falling, and dying slowly away.

It was fit for hell. And Leclère, with fiendish ken, seemed to divine each particular nerve and heart-string, and with long wails and tremblings and sobbing minors to make it yield up its last shred of grief. It was frightful, and for twenty-four hours after, Bâtard was nervous and unstrung, starting at common sounds, tripping over his own shadow, but, withal, vicious and masterful with his team-mates. But no sign did he show of a breaking spirit. Rather he grew more grim and taciturn, biding his time with an inscrutable patience that began to puzzle and weigh upon Leclère. The dog would lie in the firelight, motionless, for hours, gazing straight before him at Leclère, and hating him with his bitter eyes.

But all bad things come to an end, and so with Black Leclère.

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On the summer low water, in a poling boat, he left McDougall for Sunrise. He left McDougall in company with Timothy Brown, and he arrived at Sunrise by himself. Further, it was known that they had quarreled just previous to pulling out; for the *Lizzie,* a wheezy ten-ton sternwheeler, twenty-four hours behind, beat Leclère in by three days. And when he did get in, it was with a clean-drilled bullet-hole through his shoulder muscle, and a tale of ambush and murder.

A strike had been made at Sunrise, and things had changed considerably. With the infusion of several hundred gold-seekers, a deal of whiskey, and half a dozen equipped gamblers, the missionary had seen the page of his years of labor with the Indians wiped clean. He took to his bed, said "Bless me" several times, and departed to his final accounting in a rough-hewn, oblong box. Whereupon the gamblers moved their roulette and faro tables into the mission house, and the click of chips and clink of glasses went up from dawn till dark and to dawn again.

Now Timothy Brown was well beloved among these adventurers of the north. The one thing against him was his quick temper and ready fist—a little thing, for which his kind heart and forgiving hand more than atoned. On the other hand, there was nothing to atone for Black Leclère. He was "black," as more than one remembered deed bore witness, while he was as well hated as the other was beloved. So the men of Sunrise put an antiseptic dressing on his shoulder and haled him before Judge Lynch.

It was a simple affair. He had quarreled with Timothy Brown at McDougall. With Timothy Brown he had left McDougall. Without Timothy Brown he had arrived at Sunrise. Considered in the light of his wickedness, the unanimous conclusion was that he had killed Timothy Brown. On the other hand, Leclère acknowledged their facts but challenged their conclusion, and gave his own explanation. Twenty miles out of Sunrise he and Timothy Brown were poling the boat along the rocky shore. From that shore two rifle shots rang out. Timothy Brown pitched out of the boat and went down bubbling red, and that was the last of Timothy Brown. He, Leclère, pitched into the bottom of the boat with a stinging shoulder. He lay very quiet, peeping at the shore. After a time two Indians stuck up their heads and came out to the water's edge, carrying between them a birchbark canoe. As they launched it, Leclère let fly. He potted one, who went over the side after the manner of Timothy Brown. The other dropped into the bottom of the canoe, and then canoe and poling boat went down the stream in a drifting battle. After that they hung up on a split

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current, and the canoe passed on one side of an island, the poling boat on the other. That was the last of the canoe, and he came on into Sunrise. Yes, from the way the Indian in the canoe jumped, he was sure he had potted him. That was all.

This explanation was not deemed adequate. They gave him ten hours' grace while the *Lizzie* steamed down to investigate. Ten hours later she came wheezing back to Sunrise. There had been nothing to investigate. No evidence had been found to back up his statements. They told him to make his will, for he possessed a fifty-thousand-dollar Sunrise claim, and they were a law-abiding as well as a law-giving breed.

Leclère shrugged his shoulders. "Bot one t'ing," he said; "a leetle, w'at you call, favor—a leetle favor, dat is eet. I gif my feefty t'ousan' dollair to de church. I gif my husky dog, Bâtard, to de devil. De leetle favor? Firs' you hang heem, an' den you hang me. Eet is good, eh?"

Good it was, they agreed, that Hell's Spawn should break trail for his master across the last divide, and the court was adjourned down to the river bank, where a big spruce tree stood by itself. Slackwater Charley put a hangman's knot in the end of a hauling-line, and the noose was slipped over Leclère's head and pulled tight around his neck. His hands were tied behind his back, and he was assisted to the top of a cracker box. Then the running end of the line was passed over an overhanging branch, drawn taut, and made fast. To kick the box out from under would leave him dancing on the air.

"Now for the dog," said Webster Shaw, sometime mining engineer. "You'll have to rope him, Slackwater."

Leclère grinned. Slackwater took a chew of tobacco, rove a running noose, and proceeded leisurely to coil a few turns in his hand. He paused once or twice to brush particularly offensive mosquitoes from his face. Everybody was brushing mosquitoes except Leclère, about whose head a small cloud was visible. Even Bâtard, lying full-stretched on the ground, rubbed the pests away from eyes and mouth with his forepaws.

But while Slackwater waited for Bâtard to lift his head, a faint call came down the quiet air, and a man was seen waving his arms and running across the flat from Sunrise. It was the storekeeper.

"C-call 'er off, boys," he panted, as he came in among them.

"Little Sandy and Bernadotte's jes' got in," he explained with returning breath. "Landed down below an' come up by the short cut. Got the Beaver with 'em. Picked 'm up in his canoe, stuck in a back channel, with a couple of bullet holes in 'm. Other buck

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was Klok-Kutz, the one that knocked spots out of his squaw and dusted."

"Eh? W'at Ah say? Eh?" Leclère cried exultantly. "Dat de one fo' sure! Ah know. Ah spik true."

"The thing to do is teach these damned Siwashes a little manners," spoke Webster Shaw. "Round in all the bucks and string up the Beaver for an object lesson. That's the program. Come on and let's see what he's got to say for himself."

"Heh, *M'sieu'!*" Leclère called, as the crowd began to melt away through the twilight in the direction of Sunrise. "Ah lak ver' moch to see de fon."

"Oh, we'll turn you loose when we come back," Webster Shaw shouted over his shoulder. "In the meantime meditate on your sins and the ways of providence. It will do you good."

As is the way with men who are accustomed to great hazards, whose nerves are healthy and trained to patience, so it was with Leclère. He settled himself to the long wait—which is to say that he reconciled his mind to it. There was no settling of the body, for the taut rope forced him to stand rigidly erect. The least relaxation of the leg muscles pressed the rough-fibred noose into his neck, while the upright position caused him much pain in his wounded shoulder. He projected his underlip and expelled his breath upward along his face to blow the mosquitoes away from his eyes. But the situation had its compensation. To be snatched from the maw of death was well worth a little bodily suffering, only it was unfortunate that he should miss the hanging of the Beaver.

And so he mused, till his eyes chanced to fall upon Bâtard, head between forepaws and stretched on the ground asleep. And then Leclère ceased to muse. He studied the animal closely, striving to sense if the sleep were real or feigned. Bâtard's sides were heaving regularly, but Leclère felt that the breath came and went a shade too quickly; also he felt that there was a vigilance or alertness to every hair that belied sleep. He would have given his Sunrise claim to be assured that the dog was not awake, and once, when one of his joints cracked, he looked quickly and guiltily at Bâtard to see if he roused. He did not rouse then, but a few minutes later he got up slowly and lazily, stretched, and looked carefully about him.

"*Sacredam,*" said Leclère, under his breath.

Assured that no one was in sight or hearing, Bâtard sat down, curled his upper lip almost into a smile, looked up at Leclère, and licked his chops.

Then Bâtard came nearer, the useless ear wabbling, the good ear cocked forward with devilish comprehension. He thrust his head

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on one side quizzically and advanced with mincing, playful steps. He rubbed his body gently against the box till it shook and shook again. Leclère teetered carefully to maintain his equilibrium.

"Bâtard," he said calmly, "look out. Ah keel you."

Bâtard snarled at the word and shook the box with greater force. Then he upreared, and with his forepaws threw his weight against it higher up. Leclère kicked out with one foot, but the rope bit into his neck and checked so abruptly that it nearly overbalanced him.

"Hi, ya! *Chook! Mush-on!*" he screamed.

Bâtard retreated, for twenty feet or so, with a fiendish levity in his bearing that Leclère could not mistake. He remembered the dog often breaking the scum of ice on the water hole, by lifting up and throwing his weight upon it; and, remembering, he understood what the dog now had in mind. Bâtard faced about and paused. He showed his white teeth in a grin, which Leclère answered; and then he hurled his body through the air, in full charge, straight for the box.

Fifteen minutes later Slackwater Charley and Webster Shaw, returning, caught a glimpse of a ghostly pendulum swinging back and forth in the dim light. As they hurriedly drew in closer, they made out the man's inert body, and a live thing that clung to it, and gave it the swaying motion.

"Hi, ya! *Chook!* you Spawn of Hell," yelled Webster Shaw.

But Bâtard glared at him, and snarled threateningly, without loosing his jaws.

Slackwater Charley got out his revolver, but his hand was shaking as with a chill, and he fumbled.

"Here, you take it," he said, passing the weapon over.

Webster Shaw laughed shortly, drew a sight between the gleaming eyes, and pressed the trigger. Bâtard's body twitched with the shock, threshed the ground spasmodically for a moment, and went suddenly limp. But his teeth still held fast . . .

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MORRIS LEE GREEN**

TITLE: ***The Murder-of-the-Month Club***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Cardaman, the multimillionaire, was waiting for his most trusted—and most secret—employee. It is interesting to note that Cardaman's favorite recreation was the reading of mystery and detective stories.*

CARDAMAN WAS SCARCELY THE worrying type. A self-made man with a granite personality, who had made enemies and millions impartially in his skyrocketing financial career, he was cold and unimaginative—a realist.

Still, Rell's call kept gnawing at a corner of his mind while the rest of it tried to concentrate on his plans for a final spin-off of Blalock Corporation assets. There was something odd about it, something Cardaman could not quite put his finger on. And anything that Cardaman could not put his finger on bothered him. He had not seen Rell for months. Actually, this was only the second time Rell had asked for an appointment. Their other meetings—except, of course, the first—had taken place at Cardaman's request.

At last, angry with himself because of his inability to concentrate, Cardaman thrust the Blalock reports back into their folder and pulled open the desk drawer that his secretary kept stuffed with the latest mystery novels. They were Cardaman's favorite recreation—in fact, his only interest other than the amassing of a fortune already so vast and tenuous that its ultimate outlines were as difficult to discern as those of Einstein's universe. He glanced quickly over the titles.

"Damn!"

It was a mild explosion, under his breath. He had read them all.

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He jabbed a thick, impatient finger at a buzzer, and only when its impersonal echo came back muted from the small outer office, off the foyer, did he remember that he had sent everyone out for the evening, even the servants. He always did that when Rell was coming.

When he lifted his finger from the buzzer, the sudden cessation of sound was like a shock in the silent New York town house. Even the noise of traffic on Fifth Avenue seeped through the thick walls of the remodeled brownstone as a barely audible ghost of sound.

Cardaman drummed on the polished desk top, grateful for the small splinters of sound he was driving into the almost palpable silence. He hoped that Rell was not in some sort of trouble. That could be a nuisance, if not actually dangerous. But it was not likely. On the telephone Rell's voice had sounded as imperturbable as always. No trace of panic. Cardaman appreciated the man's unemotional, businesslike quality; it was what had persuaded him, at their first meeting two years ago, when his own situation was so desperate . . .

Rell had written asking for an appointment and enclosing a letter of introduction from Fitzroy Barton. Amused, Cardaman had granted an interview. The first thing he had noticed when Rell walked into the office—this same office—was the appraising quality of the man's eyes. They were a pale watery blue, with all the emotion washed out—the eyes of a man who could be dangerous, even deadly.

He was.

Cardaman had picked up the introductory letter and remarked casually, "This is a curious thing."

"A forgery, of course," Rell had said quietly.

Cardaman was surprised. "Not a very good one, either. It's dated two days after his death."

"That's what did the trick," Rell said, unperturbed.

"Trick?"

"It caught your interest," Rell pointed out. "You wondered what I had up my sleeve. You decided to see me." He seated himself, keeping his coat and gloves on and his hat in his lap. Cardaman wondered what his hands looked like, but in all the long months that he was fated to know Rell, the man did not once remove his gloves. "You are a difficult man to meet, Mr. Cardaman. You exist inside walls within walls."

Cardaman regarded his caller with increased respect. "Well, you're inside the walls now," he said. "What is it you want?"

"I wish to offer you a membership in The Murder-of-the-Month Club."

Cardaman was usually polite, even to his enemies. He had discovered early in life that it cost him nothing and sometimes paid

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a profit. But he was unable to conceal his annoyance now. "See my secretary," he snapped.

"I believe that you would not wish your secretary to handle this matter."

"My secretary has a standing order to buy every mystery that's published."

Rell protested mildly, "But I am not selling books."

Cardaman again had the uncomfortable feeling of having underestimated this man. "What are you selling?"

"Murder."

Rell said it so quietly—in just such a commonplace manner as he might have said "books" or "real estate" or "insurance"—that it was a moment before the word actually registered with Cardaman. He repeated it: "Murder?" And his voice surprised him by sliding off to a thin, ragged incredulity.

"Precisely," Rell said. "Of course the name, The Murder-of-the-Month Club, is informal. The club is not incorporated or chartered. That did not seem advisable."

"I suppose not." Cardaman had regained control of his voice. "Isn't your—line rather dangerous?"

"There are certain hazards," Rell conceded. "But it happens to be a type of enterprise for which I am particularly suited. And it pays well—oh, not by your standards, but well enough for me. My tastes are moderate. And I do not accept cases involving the passions of my clients; I act only for business reasons—my clients' business, that is—and thus eliminate the emotional element, which is usually the principal source of danger."

Cardaman said cautiously, "I have no need for your services."

"Fitzroy Barton," Rell said, as if he had not heard. "He was my last subject."

"Subject?" Then Cardaman grasped his meaning. "But he died of a heart attack!"

Rell shook his head slowly. "An 'accident' or a 'natural death' is usually more convenient than an obvious murder. The police are not so curious."

Cardaman stared at him for a moment. The possibilities in Rell's proposal interested him, but for the first time in his life he felt a slight tremor of fear. "I said I don't need anything like that," he reminded Rell.

"But of course you do," Rell said equably. "You have staked everything you own—and quite a lot that you don't—on getting control of the Blalock Corporation. But you won't get it while Horace Blalock lives." The straight, thin line of his lips elongated almost imperceptibly in what was apparently meant to be a smile. "Yes, Mr. Cardaman, I think you do need me."

After a moment Cardaman observed, "You seem to know a lot about me."

"I do. I select my clientele with

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extreme care, for obvious reasons. Our relationship is necessarily a continuing one of complete mutual trust, motivated solely by the desire for mutual profit."

There was a long silence.

"How much?" Cardaman asked at last.

That was how it had begun.

After that first meeting Cardaman was dubious, but his doubt evaporated when Horace Blalock was killed in an automobile "accident" thirteen days later. Rell, it seemed, produced. Thereafter, on the increasingly rare occasions that Cardaman wished to utilize Rell's services, he telephoned a private organization that relayed messages for a fee. The following Friday night he would wait, alone as he was waiting now, until Rell had an opportunity to slip into the town house unobserved. He never saw the man at any other time or place. Rell's fees—cash in advance—varied from twenty-five to seventy-five thousand dollars. Despite the name Rell had given his operation, Cardaman did not employ his services each month; that was a maximum limit, not a minimum.

"The name, The Murder-of-the-Month Club, is merely a little conceit of mine," Rell had explained. "It dramatizes the thing rather nicely, I think. In any case, I could not possibly accept more than one case a month from each of my clients. You realize that these matters require much preparation?"

Yes, Cardaman understood that.

"On the other hand," Rell had said, "I accept as clients only men like yourself—men who have many enemies. I prefer to keep busy." He had smiled that disconcerting, thin, straight smile, and had added, "Idle hands make mischief." . . .

Cardaman started as chimes rolled through the house. A signal light flickered in a panel at the side of the desk. He pressed a button. The light went off and the chimes lost voice. A moment later Rell entered, having come through the outer office from the foyer.

"I don't like this, Rell," Cardaman said without preamble. "What is it—some sort of trouble?"

"Trouble?" Rell leaned over to extract a cigarette from the box on Cardaman's desk. He lit it from Cardaman's desk lighter and dropped into the chair at Cardaman's right hand, where the financier's secretary usually sat. "Not exactly." Rell paused again. "We haven't done much business lately—not as much as I had counted on. Are you losing interest in the club?"

"What if I am?"

"Our association has been most profitable."

"It's been good business," Cardaman conceded. "But the Blalock deal has put me in a position where I no longer need to do business that way. I now prefer my own methods—purely financial methods."

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Rell nodded understandingly. "Regrettable," he sighed. "Regrettable but, I suppose, to be expected." He stubbed out the cigarette in an ashtray and rose.

Cardaman exploded, "You risked coming here just to ask about that?"

"Well, there *was* another matter," Rell murmured. "I am notifying the club members that a dividend is to be paid."

"What do you mean, a dividend?"

"Please, Mr. Cardaman," Rell said reproachfully. "The club offers only one commodity. In this case, of course, the subject must be one whose demise will be rather widely appreciated. But you need not concern yourself. The dividend will go only to members of the club who are, shall we say, active."

Cardaman frowned. "I don't get it. How can you give this—this dividend to everybody?"

"Permit me to demonstrate," Rell offered politely. "There is really no trick to it at all, especially since I have taken the liberty of borrowing your gun."

And with a single swift motion Rell's gloved hand drew a pistol from his pocket, put it neatly against Cardaman's right temple, and pulled the trigger.

When he had carefully placed the weapon where it ought to be, in Cardaman's right hand, Rell looked around, gave a satisfied nod, and departed unhurriedly.

Thanks

EQMM's regular readers will remember that our housekeeper recently called for help in cleaning out a surprising number of old issues that were bulging her closets. She offered 10 assorted copies for one dollar—and the response was overwhelming.

Our housekeeper is most grateful, and reports that all copies prior to the 1956 and 1957 issues are now gone. And she offers a suggestion for the newer copies—they would make fine gifts for friends or relatives who do not read EQMM regularly. Further, she offers to enclose your gift cards with all such gift orders. Send in the address of the person you want to receive 10 assorted copies of 1956 and 1957 issues of EQMM (a $3.50 value!) together with $1—and a gift card, if you choose—and we will do the rest.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **DICK ASHBAUGH**

TITLE: ***The Course of Truelove***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The Elliott household the morning after . . . contemporary Americana! Meet a teen-ager—and does she have troubles; meet Mr. and Mrs. E.—and do* they *have troubles! Best of all, meet Truelove—majordomo de luxe.*

IT WAS THE HOUR OF DAY TRUELOVE liked best. Early morning sunshine flooded the big spotless Elliott kitchen, brushing softly across the polished steel and porcelain. He did a little time-step in front of the range and plugged in the coffee-maker. Twirling silently over the gleaming floor, he came face to face with his dark image in the wall mirror. There was an infinitesimal speck on the lapel of his white jacket, and the black bow tie needed a minor adjustment.

Perched on a high stool at the counter with the morning paper unfolded across his knees, Truelove listened for a sound of movement from above. Then he opened the paper at the sports page, took a small notebook from his pocket, and began checking the entries at the eastern tracks.

Over Baby Eyes in the third at Pimlico he slapped his knee happily. "A sleeper," he chortled aloud. "Baby Eyes in a six furlong race." He made a quick mark in the notebook. "Here's where this cat murders 'em."

"Murders who, Truelove?" asked a voice from the doorway. The voice, partially muffled by a yawn, belonged to a pretty young girl in a plaid duster. She carried a white telephone in one hand and a bird cage in the other containing a brilliant blue parakeet.

Truelove sighed and slid the paper across the counter. "There

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goes my piece of quiet," he said. "How come you aprowl at this hour, Miss Ginny? Girl of fourteen needs her sleep."

"Big deal, Truelove." She crossed to the kitchen desk, unplugged the conventional black phone, and connected the one she carried.

Truelove hung the bird cage on a loop near the window. "Marlon off his feed or something?" he asked. "He looks droopy to me." The parakeet opened a baleful eye. "Drop dead," he squeaked coldly. At the desk Ginny fanned through the telephone book.

"The thing I don't understand," said Truelove, "is why you can't use the phone we have down here?"

Ginny fought another yawn. "No balance, Truelove. Just doesn't feel right." The phone whirred suddenly and she gave a startled little gasp as she picked up the receiver. Her greeting was hesitant, and then she was silent for a full minute listening. "I can't talk now," she said finally. "I'll call you back." She arose, ran her hand through her bright tousled hair and, suddenly listless, walked into the breakfast alcove.

Truelove turned the switch on the waffle iron, gave the bowl of batter a quick stir, and watched Ginny sink onto the leather seat. He crossed over and flicked gently at the table with a snowy tea towel. "No reason you should tell me," he said, looking down at her bowed head. "No reason at all, Miss Ginny. Matter of fact, I don't care one way or the other. Want a nice hot waffle with melted butter?"

A small voice answered. "Creepers, I couldn't eat a bite." The head came up slowly. "You mean pecan waffles?"

"The most," said Truelove. "First, though, what kind of jam are you in this time? Short on your allowance again?"

She looked up solemnly. "Worse than that, Truelove. Horribly. I have to raise two hundred dollars by Monday morning."

Truelove's towel snapped to a halt in midair. "Oh, come now, Miss Ginny. How could you possibly need that kind of scratch?"

"I lost a gold bracelet," said Ginny with a moan. "It belonged to Bootsie's mother and Bootsie says I lost it."

"Hm'm." Truelove walked across the kitchen and tested the waffle iron. "And that was Bootsie on the phone?"

"Yes. She says I have by school time Monday morning to either find the bracelet or tell my father. If I don't find it my father will have to pay two hundred dollars."

Truelove carefully poured batter on the steaming iron. "How'd you lose it?"

"I don't remember," said Ginny dismally. "Bootsie had it after school at the Candy Kitchen. She's

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always wearing her mother's jewelry. Sneaks it, I guess. Anyhow, she passed it to me and I let Gracie look at it. That's the last I remember. Then, all of a sudden, Bootsie asked me for the bracelet and I didn't have it. I didn't even see it after I passed it to Gracie."

"Quite a situation," said Truelove. "This Bootsie. Does she belong to that new family that took over the Blanford place—the Beauchamps?"

"She's their daughter," said Ginny. "They're loaded. She's allowed to go to Cardi's every week and get her hair fixed. Mr. Nick himself takes care of her. He styles her purple."

"So I hear," said Truelove. Expertly he slid the crisp waffle onto a plate, dusted it with powdered sugar, and carried it to the table. "I hear some other things about that family."

Ginny reached for the maple syrup. "What other things?"

"Odds and ends. Here and there." His ears, attuned to the smallest sound, detected a movement in the outer hallway. "Better cut it off now. Here comes your mother."

Mrs. Elliott swirled through the door in a fluttering, many-layered negligee. "I heard mumbling," she said. "Oh, it's you, Ginny. What in heaven's name are you doing up at this hour? Saturday and all." She reached for a cup and saucer on the shelf. "Never mind, Truelove, I'm perfectly capable of pouring my own coffee." She stirred the cup briskly, took a sip, and glanced at the paper spread on the counter. "John Foster Dulles," she murmured. "Now what's he up to?"

"Good morning, mother," said Ginny. "Truelove made pecan waffles. Better have one."

"Ugh," said Mrs. Elliott. "The coffee's splendid, Truelove," she added in apology.

"Thanks, Mrs. Elliott." Truelove carefully covered the bowl of batter and put it in the refrigerator.

"I know they're delicious, Truelove. But I don't think Mr. Elliott will particularly want one. Tomato juice, more than likely. Or a revolver. We were at the Marshalls' last night."

"Yes, ma'am," said Truelove. "Did Dr. Marshall make his famous Killer Diller?"

"I'm afraid he did. And he served them in cocktail glasses the size of a bird bath."

"Yes, ma'am," said Truelove. "I've helped out there on parties."

Mrs. Elliott took another sip of coffee. "The Beauchamps were there, too. She wears the most flamboyant jewelry."

In the breakfast room Ginny's fork clattered suddenly on her plate. "The Beauchamps, mother?"

"Yes, dear, the Beauchamps. Oh, you know their daughter. What sort of child is she?"

Ginny seemed to lose interest in her waffle. "She isn't exactly a

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child. She's been all over the world. This is her third father. At least, that's what she tells the kids. She has her own mink stole."

"Hm'm," said Mrs. Elliott. "Her mother is certainly lucky at bridge. In the past few weeks she's won . . ." She glanced out the kitchen window. "Well, I see your father's practicing chip shots on the lawn. He must feel better than I thought."

A ball thumped against the house. "Or worse," said Truelove. "That one had too much wrist."

"Fix him something, Truelove. Tomato juice or whatever. You should know what he needs the morning after. You were with him long enough in the army."

"Air Force, Mrs. Elliott." He opened the refrigerator door and removed a tall, chilled glass. "And I've got it right here."

"Serve it on the side porch, Truelove, and bring me more coffee. The air, if there is any, should revive me." Mrs. Elliott swirled out the door.

Ginny rose slowly and carried her plate into the kitchen. "I'm in the soup, Truelove. Mother and daddy knowing the Beauchamps will only make things worse."

"Look, Miss Ginny, there's something peculiar here. Let me dig the situation. If you want to do me a favor, go see if Miss Lois is stirring. I might as well resuscitate the whole family at one fell swoop."

"Hah," said Ginny. "I happen to know that Miss Flower-face got in at two thirty because Marlon gave her a wolf whistle. Good thing the folks weren't home. She'd been smooching, too, because her lipstick was all smeared. When I'm nineteen—"

"All right, all right, Miss Ginny," said Truelove soothingly. "Maybe when you're nineteen you won't go fooling around with somebody else's mother's jewelry. Now scat."

Truelove came through the French doors onto the screened porch as Mr. Elliott entered from the garden side. He carried a number five iron in one hand and a bouquet of flowers in the other. "Here, Truelove," he said. "Take these in the kitchen and arrange them."

Mrs. Elliott stirred impatiently on the lounge. "Did you bring the coffee, Truelove?"

"Yes, ma'am." He took the bouquet speculatively in one hand. "I could do with a bit more baby's breath, Colonel."

"The two of you could do with a hit in the head," said Mrs. Elliott. "George, could I ask you a question?"

"Certainly, dear—in one minute." Mr. Elliott picked up the tall glass, downed half of it, took a deep breath, then finished the remainder. "Ah," he sighed, "a formula known only to Bacchus and Truelove. It was the secret weapon of AirPac." He sank into a chair. "All right, dear, interrogate."

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"I will," she said. "Why were you so cozy with Mr. Beauchamp last night? The two of you looked as though you'd just discovered a way to improve the wheel."

Mr. Elliott's gaze had been steady up to that moment. Suddenly it swept off over her head, circled around the porch, brushed fleetingly over Truelove, and came to rest on a detail in the carpeting.

"I—uh—don't think I was particularly nailed to his side. Why do you ask?"

"For several reasons," said his wife promptly. "I'll be honest with you and you be honest with me. I lost ninety dollars playing bridge with his wife."

Mr. Elliott's feet hit the floor with a thud. "Ninety dollars! Are you out of your mind, Grace? You couldn't lose ninety dollars playing girls' rules. It just isn't possible!"

"Hah," said Mrs. Elliott, "that's what you think. Elaine Beauchamp has started a new fad. Big stakes. But don't worry about the money. It came out of a fund I was saving for your birthday present. Happy birthday."

Mr. Elliott sank back glumly. "You play a better game than that. She's clobbered me time and again."

"Of course," said Mrs. Elliott. "And I could beat you at poker, too, except that poker is about as scientific as Musical Chairs."

"Then what does Mrs. Beauchamp have?" he asked coldly. "A stacked deck?"

"Oh, don't be silly. But she does have uncanny luck. I was wondering if her husband has the same touch. He seemed to be selling you something."

Mr. Elliott shifted uneasily. "As a matter of fact, Mike Beauchamp has an interesting proposition. Do you want me to break it down for you?"

"Oh, it's Mike, is it?" She looked over her shoulder. "Truelove, have you been listening to this exchange?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Truelove. "Every word."

"I'll bet," said Mrs. Elliott. "Do you suppose," she asked brightly, "I could have just a teensy waffle, Truelove?"

"Of course, Mrs. Elliott, but they're not exactly teensy. This waffle iron only makes one size."

"Bring two plates. Mr. Elliott will share it with me."

"Ugh," said George Elliott. He sank back and covered his eyes with his hand. "Bring the waffle, Truelove, teensy or not."

"Yes, sir, Colonel, sir."

"And cut out the military routine!" he barked. "After all, we've been out of uniform over ten years."

"Yes, sir, Colonel, sir." Truelove picked up the tray and headed for the kitchen, smiling to himself. This was the second best time of the day.

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By 10:45 Truelove had polished the last bit of cutlery and the Elliott kitchen was restored to its pristine brilliance. Miss Lois had appeared briefly, her head swathed in a towel, and requested egg whites for a shampoo. She declined breakfast, but leaning over the counter she sipped a small orange juice. "I just can't trust my hair to anybody, Truelove," she moaned. "Nobody understands it." Truelove nodded dolefully.

A few minutes later Ginny pushed through the swinging door attired in Bermuda shorts and a white sweater. "We're hiking out to a girl who sits next to me in school's farm," she explained. "Her father is going to dynamite tree stumps." Then she added listlessly, "I don't even want to go."

"Sounds real cool," said Truelove cheerfully.

Ginny paused in the middle of the floor, her eyes filled with tears. "I'm worried sick, Truelove. How can I ever tell daddy about losing the bracelet?"

Truelove slid the tray of silver into a drawer. "I'm not sure, Miss Ginny. But I was his supply sergeant during the war, and once I had to tell him about losing twenty-four cases of beer. Another outfit hijacked it. The colonel just grunted."

"He won't grunt at this," said Ginny. "He'll howl bloody murder."

"Suppose," said Truelove, "you just traipse along and let me handle the situation."

"Poor Truelove," said Ginny, backing toward the door. "You've got enough to worry about with daddy's surprise birthday party tonight and all." She disappeared, giving him a sad smile.

For a moment Truelove stood transfixed. Birthday party! But that was *next* Saturday. Or was it? He flipped open the door of his supply cabinet and glanced at the calendar. It was this Saturday, all right. Seven couples. Bridge upstairs, poker down, buffet, bar, two helpers. He shut the door, whistling softly.

Mrs. Elliott appeared from the dining room and carefully closed the door. "Make that eight couples including us, Truelove," she said. "I've invited the Beauchamps. That will work out nicely for two tables of bridge. The men, of course, will be playing 'Mother, May I?' or whatever it is they do downstairs. Now, how about help?"

"I—uh—haven't signed anybody yet," said Truelove. "But that shouldn't be any trouble. The usual buffet?"

"I suppose so. Turkey, ham, probably a tenderloin. Caesar salad for the healthy, relish tray, hot rolls, coffee, and I think you'd better plunge for a box of Coronas. I noticed Mr. Beauchamp smokes them."

"Yes, ma'am. The bar's all set. Anything else?"

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Mrs. Elliott hesitated. "Truelove, I understand you were quite a card expert in the army. Ever play bridge?"

"Not much, Mrs. Elliott. Gin's my game. Gin and poker."

"What I was wondering—is there really such a thing as trick dealing? I mean sleight of hand? Of course, I've heard of professional card sharps—men on boats and that sort of thing."

Truelove grinned. "Plenty of men on land working the same caper, Mrs. Elliott. There must be a hundred ways of trick dealing. Know a few myself."

"Is there any way a person could tell if someone was doing this sort of thing?"

"Average player couldn't," said Truelove. "You have to know what to look for. It takes a pretty good eye."

"I suppose so." She turned as her husband entered the room. "Remember, George," she said, "we're dining alone tonight." She managed a wink at Truelove. "We'll celebrate your birthday together, just the two of us. Far from the madding crowd."

"Where would that be," he asked absently, "outer Mongolia? Yes, dear, I'll remember." He waited until she left the room and then sat down at the table. Automatically Truelove poured him a cup of coffee. "Don't mind me, Truelove," he said. "I just wanted to talk to somebody."

"Yes, Colonel," said Truelove. "Cut loose when ready."

"You heard us talking about Mike Beauchamp trying to sell me something. Actually, he's already sold me. It's a Canadian stock proposition and I won't go into details. The stock is legitimate enough—I've checked every angle on that—and if his information is correct, we stand to make quite a bit of money. There's just one angle I don't like."

"Everybody's got an angle, Colonel. What's his?"

"He's working through a syndicate in Toronto and they insist on cash. I gave him a certified check last night. So did Doc Marshall and a half dozen others who are in on the deal. It's quite a bundle."

"How do they feel about it?" asked Truelove.

"Apparently I'm the only suspicious one in the crowd. I have a nagging idea there's a loose bolt some place. It's like listening to a B-29 engine that doesn't sing right. Know what I mean, Truelove?"

"Yes, sir. Got anything definite to go on?"

"Nothing you could put your finger on. Beauchamp sailed into town a few months ago and made a lot of friends. Charming guy, really. Spends big. Talks extremely well. Has a good-looking wife and daughter. Made a couple of the best clubs with no trouble. But here and there you find a phony

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touch. Everybody thinks he bought the Blanford place, and they were asking a whopping price. But a chap I know in the real estate business told me the other day that Beauchamp talked them into leasing the place furnished for six months, with an option to buy. He could scoop up his wardrobe and walk out of there tomorrow. Or am I thinking evil thoughts?"

"Evil is as evil does," murmured Truelove, "Or maybe it's the other way around."

"I've talked to Doc and the other fellows, but they just laugh me off. I could have pulled out, of course, but it would have upset the whole deal. I can yet, if there is some way I can nail Beauchamp and show him up—always supposing I'm right, of course. It would have to be done carefully." He drummed on the table.

Truelove removed the coffee cup and carried it to the sink. "Colonel," he said, "I've got a little old sergeant-type idea that might work. But you'll have to let me handle it my own way."

Mr. Elliott stood up a trifle wearily. "It's all yours, Truelove. I'm stymied."

"Yes, sir, Colonel, sir," said Truelove. Mr. Elliott paused in the doorway and gave Truelove a brooding, colonel-type look. Then he grinned and walked out.

Truelove sat down at the telephone and opened a small black notebook. On the third call—to the Sunset Bowling & Billiards Academy—he located his cousin. "You busy tonight, Sig? I need a man."

Sig squawked briefly. "I was going to take Marie to the all-night-and-far-into-the-morning movie at the drive-in. What's up, True?"

"Bring her here, man. I need a maid, too. This is a kind of special deal, Sig. Mayday."

"Oh," said his cousin. "If it's for the colonel, well, all right. What time?"

"About seven. You sure about Marie?"

"Sure I'm sure. Need anything?"

"Just one thing. Dig around and find out who's working for the Beauchamps. They took over the Blanford place. Marie might know."

"Tootie Keefer's driving for them. I know that much. Why?"

"I need an inside antenna."

"Well, Tootie's your man. He's inside, outside, and all over the place. He stops in here on Saturday. I'll have him call you."

Truelove hung up feeling satisfied for the moment. The next hour was spent organizing the surprise birthday party. Sundry merchants were telephoned and ordered to yield up their choicest viands. The bar supplies were inspected and arranged, and the basement refrigerator was set to work producing ice cubes. From time to time he ran a supervisory eye over the work of Goldie, the new cleaning girl. All was well.

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Lunch was a casual affair. Then Mr. Elliott was off to the woods and irons; Mrs. Elliott departed for the bazaars; and a revitalized Lois left for a rendezvous with friends.

Shortly after one o'clock Truelove checked the track entries and placed several bets with a gravel-voiced individual he knew only as a phone number. As he hung up, an incredibly long car of foreign extraction pulled around the rear drive, and Tootie Keefer came up the back steps twirling his chauffeur's cap.

"Hi ya, boy," he said, his wizened face shattering into a grin. "Sig told me, and I was coming past anyway. What's on your mind?"

Truelove seated him at the kitchen table, opened a cold ale, and spread a light snack. They talked for a half hour, and occasionally Tootie nodded and wrote a line or two in a small notebook. "Will do," he said finally, and departed.

By eight o'clock that evening the party was in full swing. Showing almost stoic calm, Mr. Elliott had managed to survive the shock of surprise, and immediately took over the duties of a host. The men gravitated toward the game room downstairs where Sig ministered to their needs. Upstairs, a cacophony of chatter from the living room indicated that two tables of bridge were gathering steam. Marie threaded through the room with tinkling trays, alert to any signal from the hostess.

In his kitchen headquarters Truelove monitored the operation and conversed with Tootie Keefer, temporarily pressed into service as buffet assistant. They talked earnestly in low tones.

"First thing I did was check the phone bills," said Tootie. "No calls to Canada. Some to New York and other places, but no Canada."

"Mr. Beauchamp ever make any trips to Canada?" asked Truelove.

"He's made some trips, but I don't think he went in that direction. Of course, he don't tell me everything. I get it listenin'."

"Has he said anything lately about a trip?"

"I was just gonna tell you. All week he's been talking about this trip to Toronto. Some kind of big deal up there. Turns out he's taking the missus and the girl along."

Truelove looked thoughtful. "That checks. When they leaving?"

"Late Monday afternoon. Only they ain't goin' to Canada."

"What do you mean, Tootie?"

"Well, after I left here Mr. Beauchamp sent me down to the airline office to pick up the tickets. I just asked the clerk casual-like were these Mr. Beauchamp's tickets to Canada? She says they're Mr. Beauchamp's tickets, all right, but they're not to Canada. They're to South America."

"South America!" Truelove's

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knife dropped with a clatter. "You sure, man?"

"Sure I'm sure," said Tootie. "Buenos Aires, I think she said."

"Oh, *oh!*" said Truelove. "Looks like it's time for Operation Drastic. You know what to do, Tootie."

Marie came crisply through the door and slid her tray across the counter. "Another julep, True, and where do you hide the bridge mix?"

"Tootie'll take this round, Marie. Where's Mrs. Beauchamp?"

"At the table on the right and doing nicely. The one in pink. She's dealing next, if that means anything."

Tootie picked up the replenished tray and departed silently. In five minutes he was back. "She's a second dealer, True, and about as smooth as I ever seen."

"That means a marked deck," said Truelove. "But those are all fresh cards. I just broke them out this evening."

Tootie grinned. "I know. I fumbled around and knocked some off the table, so I got 'em a new deck. Should have seen the look I got. Here's what she was working with." He took the cards from his jacket pocket, riffled them expertly, and dealt a hand across the table.

Truelove's brow wrinkled. "All kings and aces."

"What's a second dealer?" asked Marie, her eyes wide.

"A player who can give you the second card and make you think it came off the top," said Tootie. He pointed to an almost imperceptible smudge on the corner of the high cards. "She's using stuff the sharpies call Gookum. It won't rub off and it's easy to handle. Probably carries it in her compact. Bet she's busier'n a beaver right now markin' the new deck."

"How now," sighed Truelove. "Well, that's one under the bridge. I wonder how things are going downstairs. Better check Sig for ice."

In the basement the men were clustered about the brightly lighted billiard table, while the poker setup stood idle.

"How come the gallopin' cubes?" Truelove asked Sig casually as he emptied fresh ice into the backbar compartment.

"They started out with poker," said Sig, "but the game never got off the ground. I think it was this Mr. Beauchamp suggested the ivories. No wonder, the luck he's been having."

"Notice anything peculiar?" asked Truelove.

"Can't tell much from here," Sig replied. "Why don't you get Tootie on it? Next to cards he knows dice best."

In a few minutes Tootie came downstairs carrying a small broom and a dustpan. Mumbling apologies, he moved in and out of the group around the billiard table. Once he brushed against Mr. Beauchamp, who gave his em-

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ployee an annoyed glance and then rolled eight the hard way. Finally Mr. Elliott advised Tootie that the cleanup detail could wait until later. Tootie nodded soberly and shuffled off.

In the kitchen he stowed his broom and dustpan in the closet. "Some outfit I'm workin' for," he said. With a sigh he produced a pair of dice from his pocket and held them up to the light. "Tap dice, True. I lifted his extra set. Ever see a pair? These are real beauts."

"Haven't seen any lately," said Truelove. "You mean the kind with the little mercury pocket inside?"

"Umm," said Tootie. "You set your number face up, tap 'em against the table and roll. I could throw these babies through a transom into the next room and make my point." He tapped the dice and rolled them across the table. "Come seven." Seven came. "Well, boy, looks like you got this thing wrapped up. What now?"

Truelove picked up the dice thoughtfully. "This is a situation. I've got to tell the colonel and it might turn into a scene."

"Let it turn into a scene," said Tootie. "The colonel can handle it."

"Suppose you go on down and set up the buffet table, Tootie. You can keep an eye on things."

The door swung open and Mrs. Elliott came into the kitchen. She walked past the buffet trays lined up on the counter, selected a rosebud radish, and bit into it absently. "Truelove, do you know where I could buy a ouija board? I'm giving up bridge."

Truelove blinked. "But why, Mrs. Elliott? You've been the club champ for the past two years."

"I know," she said. "But when you run up against four slams in a row it makes you think. She didn't have anything less than a ten."

Truelove rearranged the radishes. "You mean Mrs. Beauchamp?"

"Who else?" The door swished softly and she turned in surprise. "Oh, Elaine, come in. I didn't mean to leave the table so abruptly. Join me in a radish?" She smiled brightly and extended a tray.

"Thank you, dear." The handsome blonde woman pivoted slowly in the center of the floor. "What a shiny, sparkling kitchen. You must have wonderful servants."

"Truelove here runs us all," said Mrs. Elliott. "We keep him enthralled with fringe benefits."

"How charming," said Mrs. Beauchamp. "We have that tiresome little gnome of a chauffeur who seems to be helping out here tonight. I feel I owe you an apology. He's the one who knocked the cards off the table."

"Oh," said Mrs. Elliott. "Is he a friend of yours, Truelove?"

"Yes, ma'am,' said Truelove.

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"And he was very sorry about being so clumsy." He reached around casually and picked up a deck of cards from the table. "Here they are if you'd like to use them again." He held them out to Mrs. Beauchamp. She recoiled perceptibly.

"I'm afraid," she said, "that would be bad luck."

"Yes, ma'am," said Truelove, "but these seem to be special sort of cards." He riffled them and dealt a hand on the table.

Mrs. Elliott picked them up casually and her eyes widened. "All kings and aces," she said. "How could that happen, Truelove?" Then she laughed. "Oh, I know. It's one of your tricks." She turned to Mrs. Beauchamp. "Truelove's quite clever with cards."

"He is clever," said Mrs. Beauchamp levelly. "If Truelove ever decides to leave you, I know where he could get another job that would pay extremely well." She gave him an engaging smile, turned abruptly, and marched out of the room.

"Now what did she mean by that?" asked Mrs. Elliott. "Truelove, do you think we have enough tenderloin? I just peeked downstairs and the men look unusually voracious. They always want beef when they get that way."

"There's plenty, Mrs. Elliott. I'm just going down now. Marie can handle things up here."

Sig gave him a hand with the trays. "Looks like the game's narrowed down," he murmured. "This Mr. Beauchamp has the colonel backed into a corner. He's trying to set up one throw for double or nothing."

"Oh, no," said Truelove with a groan. He moved quickly across the room. Mr. Elliott and Mr. Beauchamp were facing each other across the billiard table in apparent amiability. The rest of the group stood around in strained silence.

"Pardon me, Colonel, sir," said Truelove. "I wonder if I might see you in the kitchen for a few minutes."

His employer looked irritated. "Can't it wait, Truelove?"

"Afraid not, sir. It's about that engine. The one with the loose bolt."

"Hm'm," said Mr. Elliott. "I see. Pardon me, gentlemen. Seems to be a little mechanical trouble upstairs."

When they came back down a few minutes later, Mr. Elliott's face was expressionless.

"Well, George," said Mr. Beauchamp softly, "make it easy on yourself. I suggest one toss, high man take all."

Mr. Elliott gave a slight, choking cough. "Fair enough. Go ahead and roll."

The dice rattled briefly in Mr. Beauchamp's hand, flipped across the table, then came to rest with a five and a six showing. Nobody in the room seemed more surprised

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than Mr. Beauchamp. "Believe me," he said, "that's the first eleven I've thrown in years."

Mr. Elliott was silent for a moment. He looked around. Truelove stood at his elbow. "Mike," he said, "if you don't mind I think I'll let Truelove make my toss. He was good luck for me in the war."

Mr. Beauchamp handed over the dice with a chuckle. "Go ahead, boy," he said. "You've got a tough one to beat."

"Guess so, sir," said Truelove mildly. He set the dice quickly in his hand, rapped them against the rail, and rolled them across the table. They gamboled wildly on the green field, then came to rest with two sixes showing brilliantly in the white light. "Boxcars," somebody said explosively. Mr. Beauchamp stared unbelievingly. The colonel gave Truelove a rousing slap on the back. "Great work, Truelove! You really did it."

"Yes, sir, Colonel, sir," said Truelove. Watching Mr. Beauchamp steadily, he scooped up the dice, dropped them in the pocket of his jacket, and turned away.

Mr. Beauchamp came hastily around the table, his face wearing a set smile. "I say, Elliott, if you don't mind I'd like the dice as a souvenir."

"Of course," said Mr. Elliott jovially. "Truelove, give Mr. Beauchamp his souvenir."

Truelove turned without a word and walked back to the table. From one pocket he produced a pair of dice, glanced at them briefly, and sent them spinning down the table. Almost before they stopped rolling, another pair followed them down the green surface. A strange hush fell over the observers.

Doc Marshall broke the silence. "Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle! Four sixes. What kind of caper is this?"

Truelove's brow furrowed as he looked directly at Mr. Beauchamp. "You might ask the gentleman here. They're his dice."

A rising chorus of questions broke out around the table and then quieted as high heels clicked on the stairs. Grace Elliott came into the lighted circle. "Well!" she said cheerily. "The stags at bay. I hope you chaps are having a barrel of fun."

"We are," said her husband tonelessly, "in a strange sort of way." Across the table Mr. Beauchamp stood white-faced, his hands clutching the rail. Mrs. Elliott looked at him curiously. "I hate to be the bearer of unpleasant tidings," she said, "but Elaine has developed a sudden splitting headache, Mr. Beauchamp, and thinks perhaps she had better be taken home."

"I'm afraid," said Mr. Elliott, "that will have to wait a while. Please make her as comfortable as possible, Grace. There are a few questions I'd like to ask Mr. Beauchamp."

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Mrs. Elliott gave her husband a puzzled look. "Of course, dear." She started for the stairs. "Will it take long?"

The colonel glanced across the table where Mr. Beauchamp stood motionless, his brow glistening, his eyes darting from one face to another. "I don't think so," he said.

In the kitchen Tootie sat at the table, gazing wanly into a cup of coffee. "Looks like I maneuvered myself right out of a job," he said dismally.

"I'm sorry about that, Tootie," said Truelove. "Maybe we can work out something." A tread on the rear stairs creaked and Ginny's bright head peered around the corner. "Psst! Truelove," she said, "I came down to get Marlon. Parties make him nervous."

Truelove grinned. "I know, Miss Ginny, and I've also got a tray ready for you. Do you want milk or ginger ale to drink?"

"Whatever the others are having," said Ginny innocently.

"Oh, no, you don't, young lady. It's milk for you."

Tootie looked up suddenly. "Hey, wait a minute," he said. "Was this bracelet a twisted gold job with a horse's-head clasp?"

Ginny's eyes widened. "It sure was. Did you find it?"

"Well, not exactly," said Tootie, "but I found this in the car. It's a pawn ticket. I checked and that's the bracelet all right. Seems as though Miss Bootsie hocked it."

"That little stinker," gasped Ginny. "Wait'll I get hold of her!"

"I wouldn't count on it, Miss Ginny," said Truelove.

An hour or so later he sat with Sig and Marie over a plate of sandwiches in the kitchen alcove. "I thought the colonel handled it pretty well," said Truelove. "Easing them out without a scene."

"Should have tossed them in the pokey," said Sig, "instead of letting them leave town."

Truelove shrugged. "You know how it is with a bunch of businessmen like that. They don't want any publicity. After all, they got their checks back, and the madam made a settlement with the ladies. As they say, nobody's hurting."

The door swung open and Mr. Elliott marched into the room.

"'Tenshun!" the colonel barked. Truelove snapped to a rigid stance. Mr. Elliott handed him two envelopes. "Little token of our appreciation. One is for Tootie. Should hold him nicely until he finds another job. As for you, Sergeant . . ."

"Yes, sir, Colonel," said Truelove.

Mr. Elliott gave him a direct, colonel-type stare. "I'll see what I can do about getting you another stripe."

"Thank you, Colonel, sir," said Truelove as they exchanged brisk salutes.

It sure had been a colonel-type surprise party.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **GEORGE HARMON COXE**

TITLE: ***You Gotta Be Tough***

TYPE: Hard-boiled School

PROTAGONIST: Paul Baron

LOCALE: A big city in the United States

TIME: About 1935

COMMENTS: *For a change of reading pace—and lest you forget—here's a story from* **Black Mask:** *an example of the action yarn, restrainedly rough and tough, that contributed to the development of the hard-boiled species.*

BARON LET THE TELEPHONE RING until he finished putting the platinum-rimmed studs in the stiff-bosomed dress shirt. When he finally laid the shirt aside and lifted the receiver he said, "Hello," without much enthusiasm in his voice.

"Paul," a thin, staccato voice said, "this is Frankie Alpert. I want to see you tonight."

"I don't want to see you," Baron answered flatly. "And anyway, I've got a date."

"Break it. This is bigger than any date."

"What makes it big?"

"I can't tell you over the phone but—"

"If it's about those bonds," Baron cut in, "tell it to the police. I'm out of that now."

"Be smart, Paul." Alpert's voice was sharp, urgent. "While you've got the chance. If you change your mind, come down to my place. Call me and let me know. Bayside 5291. I'll be here a couple hours."

Baron cradled the receiver gently, stared thoughtfully at nothing for a moment; then, picking up his shirt, he slipped into it and stood in front of the mirror while absent-mindedly his fingers fastened the studs, attached the collar, and made a neat bow of the black tie.

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Standing there, frowning at his image when he finished, he was a tall, lean figure with a wiry, flat-muscled frame and an alert, ready manner of holding himself that suggested excellent coordination of brain and muscle. His face was longish, angular; his hair was straight and black, and although he was young, just past thirty, his smoky-blue eyes seemed wise, experienced.

The door buzzer interrupted him as he was putting on the waistcoat, and he buttoned it on his way across the living room.

Three men stood in the hall, making a triangle with Detective Steve Hanauer the apex, a plainclothesman on one side, and Powers, of the District Attorney's office, at the other.

Hanauer said, "Hello," sort of sheepishly. When Baron did not reply, he added, "Well, don't we get asked in?"

"Sorry," Baron said. "I've got a date and I was just going out."

"We won't keep you long."

"For what?"

"Well, we'd like to talk to you a minute. Maybe look around."

Baron smiled briefly at Hanauer; then he glanced at Powers and his eyes got hostile. "Talk here. The look around is out anyway."

"Listen." Powers pushed forward. He was a short, slender man with a pale, sharp-featured face and cold gray eyes. Aggressive, callous, he was out to make a name for himself and he made no attempt to disguise his attitude. "That kind of talk won't get you anything but trouble. We've come here in a friendly way to—"

"There'll never be anything friendly about your calling on me. You came here with Steve to front for you so you could search the place. But—"

Hanauer's thick face reddened and he said, "Now wait, Paul. Be reasonable."

"—the answer is *no!*" Baron continued, still looking at Powers. "If it was Steve, yes. Because I know him and I trust him. But I've seen you in action before, Powers."

Powers's thin lips slacked off in a sneer and his eyes narrowed. "Never mind the kidding. I've got your number. I always said there was something funny about that Brewer job."

"The last time you said it," Baron answered unpleasantly, "you got your mouth slapped."

Powers colored and his lips worked silently a moment. "Okay," he fumed. "You can hold me up, but you can't stop me."

"Just leave out the friendship and keep it strictly business," Baron said as Powers turned away. "Come back with a warrant."

Hanauer, still red-faced, shook his head sorrowfully. Baron smiled at him and said, "Sorry, Steve. I just don't like him."

When Baron strode through the

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apartment lobby five minutes later his face was grim, somber eyes set in his frown. He stopped at the switchboard and said, "Call Bayside 5291 and say that Mr. Baron will be there in a few minutes."

The Peacock Alley of the *Granada* featured subdued, expensive atmosphere, an almost endless straightaway of thick carpet, and some really good oils on its walls. Paul Baron swung briskly down this softly lighted concourse until he came to a girl who got up from a high-backed tapestried chair to meet him.

She was a medium blonde with honey-colored hair. She wore a dark-blue evening gown that matched her eyes, and a mink coat. Even without these she would have looked expensive. There was something about the way she stood up, the way she held her head and neck, that gave an intangible yet definite impression of breeding—the sort of impression that many women try for and fail to achieve.

Baron said, "How late am I?" and stood close to her, taking one of her hands. His face was no longer grim. His smile was in his eyes and the sight of her kept it there.

Janet Grainger said, "Not so very. Are we ready?"

The smile faded from Baron's eyes, but he said lightly, "Don't hate me but I've got to break our date, Jan. I told you it was a mistake to be a friend of mine."

Janet Grainger did not ask for reasons. She watched him silently. When she spoke, her voice held a warmth beyond words.

"Does that mean you're not going to Florida with us?"

"I hope not. But I have to straighten something out tonight and I don't know how long I'll be."

"But you're not a policeman now," she said. And when Baron did not answer: "You don't believe anyone really thinks you were involved in that bond robbery?"

"Some do," Baron said gravely.

His eyes softened as he watched her, then clouded as he sensed her disappointment. She was not angry with him. Hurt, rather. And he felt ashamed, as though he had made a promise to a child and was deliberately breaking it. His voice got a bit thick.

"We can go somewhere tomorrow night, can't we?"

"Of course." Janet Grainger smiled immediately, but not very genuinely. She nodded her head slightly, and said, "Well—"

Watching her and grateful for her poise, the impulse came to Baron quickly. He grinned, his eyes sparkling and one brow cocked.

"How would you like a kiss?" he asked suddenly.

Her eyes were puzzled, then smiling like his own as her mood

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keyed up to his. "I would," she said honestly.

Baron kept grinning, looked around. Then he remembered where he was and grumbled, "I guess you take enough chances with your reputation just being seen in public with a guy like me."

Janet Grainger said, "Meanie!" and took his arm as they started for the street entrance.

Baron put her in a cab, took the next in line, and gave the driver a Westland Avenue address. The inner glow that always came to him when he was with Janet Grainger lingered, and he forgot about Frankie Alpert for a while and let his thoughts wander.

He no longer tried to explain her liking for him. The daughter of P. T. Grainger, a crusty oldster who had bought and sold railroads when it was open season on such transactions, Janet had everything —town and country houses, the finest schools, the choicest clothes, a constant rush of admirers. And he, in spite of a good education, had been a cop.

Baron grunted softly. A cop. There had been enough money left him by his father to put him through college and give him a start in business, but poor investments had wiped out all the reserves just about the time he was graduated. Judge Jennings, an old friend of his father's, had given him the idea, and Baron was willing to try anything.

And because he was a cop, because he liked good clothes and knew how to wear them, he had met Janet Grainger. Detailed to the wedding reception when her brother was married, Baron was dressed in white tie and tails, and when the girl began to talk to him it was a half hour before he told her the truth. By that time she liked him.

Why she had been a partner to the friendship which had lasted two years, Baron was not sure. She had had no cooperation from anyone. At first her father had tried to discourage her; so had Baron, because he was honest— with her and himself. While he had been a cop they had met infrequently, as friends. Now that he had a little money of his own—

The cab stopped abruptly and Baron's thoughts switched to Frankie Alpert and bogged down in a slow mounting resentment. He paid the driver and walked with quick steps through the vestibule to a barny foyer presided over by a red-haired youth at a switchboard who glanced up briefly, then returned to his magazine.

Baron knocked three times on the door of Alpert's apartment on the fourth floor, then tried the knob. When it turned he pushed into a spacious, flossily furnished living room, stopped still with a quick tensing of nerves as his gaze fastened on the man who lay in

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the center of the floor beside a cushion-back chair.

Without shifting his eyes, Baron felt behind him and closed the door softly. Slowly he advanced, eyes serious, troubled. Frankie Alpert was on his back, arms wide and legs bent sidewise. A small, baldish man in his late thirties, with a rounded face that looked pale and composed, he wore an old-looking gray suit and in the left side there was a small, frayed hole. Around this a reddish stain dyed the fabric darkly.

Baron knelt, staring. After a long moment he put out a hand to feel for a pulse. Then he heard a rustle of movement to one side. A sharp, low voice said, "Stand up and stay quiet!"

For perhaps three seconds Baron's pose was rigid, arm half extended; then his head came around. He saw a pair of shoes standing in an inner doorway. His eyes slid up three pairs of trouser legs, one brown and two blue, to a leveled automatic, to three masked faces.

His mouth got tight and he said, "Where's the masquerade?" sardonically as he stood up.

The three men came into the room. They were all tall. One was slender and the other two were heavier, one with a look of muscular hardness to his body and the other with a bulging, fatty bulk.

The slender man held the gun, and stopped a few feet away. One man leaned beside the door, the other, the plump fellow, began to talk.

"Things have changed since Frankie called you."

"I see they have," Baron said dryly.

"And if you play ball with us it won't cost you anything but money." The man slid a thigh across the edge of a table. "This is the setup. Write us a check for twenty-five grand and we'll hold you till we cash it. When we let you go, you'll be clear."

"You're going to try and frame me for this kill, huh?" Baron's voice got bitter. "You think you can make it stick, do you?"

"That's part of it. And if that don't click, we can frame you as an accomplice in the Brewer bond job—and that one *will* stick when the cops find the balance of those bonds in your apartment."

Baron's muscles tensed. Anger and resentment streaked through him as he remembered Powers's call, and he did not want to speak until he had control of himself. He turned slowly, dropped lazily into the cushion-back chair, and stretched out his legs.

"So that's it?" he drawled finally. "When I was a cop and didn't have a dime all I had to worry about was my job. But when I get a little money I'm a pushover for a frame, huh?"

"Listen," the plump man con-

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tinued. "We know all about you. Bull got you your appointment. You had a better mental equipment than the average cop, and you were out to advance. Through luck—or maybe ability—you cracked a couple jobs that made publicity. The reporters went for you. You had personality. A new kind of a cop. You got into plain-clothes in a hurry and you were a first-grade detective with a reputation in three years. And then you muffed that bond job."

Baron's thoughts centered bitterly on the one failure against his record. Brewer and Company had been robbed of $125,000 in securities. Frankie Alpert had long been under suspicion as a dealer in hot bonds, and when some of the loot began to filter into the market, Baron and Powers had watched Alpert's office, had caught a man in the corridor with a brief case full of bonds. Then, while Powers went into Alpert's office to telephone, this man had pulled a tiny automatic from a coat sleeve and held up Baron, made his escape down the fire stairs with the brief case.

What complicated things was the fact that about the same time an uncle of Baron's had died in Oklahoma and left him $150,000. The coincidence of Baron having money and letting the bonds get away from him was too much for Powers. The two had never got along. Powers began to express his opinion freely. When Baron heard him say the uncle story was nothing but a gag, that Baron had allowed the fellow to escape, Baron had punched him in the mouth, and then quit the force. It had been a mistake to quit under fire. He saw that later. But at the time he had been irked by his failure, by regulations and red tape; he was young and had acted on impulse.

"So figure it out," the plump man said. "Alpert was under suspicion on that bond job. You got money all of a sudden—at just the right time. With some of those bonds in your apartment, and Alpert dead—"

Baron stood up, grim-faced, eyes cold and narrow. "I don't think you can make it stick," he said starting confidently for the door. "And I don't like the play. It stinks."

The plump man said, "Watch him, Vince!"

Vince stiffened in front of the door, squared off. Baron kept coming. When he got close Vince grabbed for him, and he sidestepped, drove a hard left to the head. Vince bounced from the door like a fighter against the ropes and came out swinging. Baron blocked a right, jabbed a left, and crossed his right, spinning to meet the slender fellow with the gun.

The man had clubbed the automatic, and off-balance as he was, Baron missed his first punch. He saw the gun swing, ducked, tried

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to cover. Pain exploded in his brain as the gun barrel glanced off his head. He staggered, weaved away; then Vince caught him on the side of the head with a roundhouse right.

Baron went down. He got to his knees. Vince hit him again flush on the jaw and Baron went over on his side. A voice said, "That's enough," and Vince said, "This lug likes it. Don't you, baby?" He pulled Baron to his knees; slapped him twice, viciously, then stepped back.

Baron staggered erect, tried to raise his hands and failed. He stood wavering, eyes clouded, arms hanging limply. Vince put a palm on his chest and pushed him, unresisting, back into the chair.

"We can't make you sign a check," the plump man said when Baron's head cleared, "but we can take you out and ride you around for a couple hours, and that ought to be enough. The cops'll find the bonds; they'll find Frankie—and we'll see to it your fingerprints are on the gun that ironed him out. The operator downstairs saw you come in. He won't see you go out, because you'll go out the back way —the same way we came in.

"Maybe you can beat that kind of a setup. But it'll cost you a damn sight more than twenty-five grand to do it. And even if you do, what'll it get you? You'll never convince the public you didn't pull a fast one. You'll be a chiseler to most people—to the Grainger girl and her old man and all your fine friends—as long as you live."

"Don't be a chump," the slender man said smoothly. "It's your only chance to get out."

Baron took out a checkbook and a pen. Regardless of his conscience, there was only one sensible thing to do. He might beat the frame but he could never completely clear himself of suspicion until he proved his case against these three men: and his only chance was to be free to fight.

One other thing decided him. He did not know Vince. But something about the plump man's mouth and fatty jowls was familiar. Of the slender man, he was sure. His voice did it, awakened latent memory. That quiet, oily voice; the smooth olive skin beneath the mask; the slender, natty figure. This was the man who had pulled the gun from his sleeve three months ago and started all of Baron's trouble.

"What happens if I pay?" he said finally. "What do you do with Alpert?"

"The same thing that was done to Dan Murphy," the man said, referring to an alderman who had disappeared one night a year ago and had never been found. "And I'll pick up the bonds. All we want is a profit; the rest of them are too hot to handle now."

Baron wrote the check. When he held it out, his other hand touched

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a bloody lump over his ear, then felt the swelling on his jaw, and he said, "But don't think I won't try to get it back." But he said it to himself.

When the sedan stopped a half hour later after a twenty minute ride, Baron began to concentrate. He was not tied, but he was blindfolded and had to be led from the car. He was walked across a sidewalk, up six stone steps. He took two paces to another step and then there was linoleum under his feet and the heat of a building rushed out to meet him as an inner door opened.

The air was stuffy and dry and the smell of banana oil got in the back of his throat. To his left a radio announcer was saying, "And now Jack Yarman gives you his own original arrangement of that old-time favorite, Dinah, Give, Jack." The dance band blasted out its introduction and Baron began to climb stairs.

At the second floor they turned right, walked a few feet, turned right again, and climbed to the third floor. At the end of this hall someone knocked three times rapidly, paused, then twice slowly. A door opened but no word was spoken. Baron was pushed across a thinly carpeted floor, down a short hall to another room. Then Vince said, "Sit down while we tie you up!"

Baron sat down, right on the floor, felt his ankles and wrists being bound. A new voice said, "I guess he's okay," and the blindfold was taken from his eyes.

Baron blinked, glanced about a room that was absolutely bare of furniture and had bars on the inside of the lone window. Vince and the slender man, still masked, watched him from the doorway. A squat, muscular fellow, who had close-cropped hair and a flat nose, stood in front of them.

A tight smile warped Baron's lips and his voice was caustic. "Where's your mask?" he asked the squat man.

Vince said, "If the check's okay you oughta be out by eleven in the morning." And to the squat man, "If he gets noisy, Distasio, go in and crown him."

The light went out and the door closed. Baron made himself as comfortable as he could and stared into the darkness.

Presently he heard the roar of an outward bound passenger train. It sounded very close and he glanced at his wristwatch. The luminous hands and numbers showed it to be 10:34.

He rolled over to the window, got to his knees, and pushed bound hands through the bars against the window pane. He tested the bars, found them solid, and lay down on the floor again. After a while a freight train chugged past. A little later there was another; then a swift-moving train, an incoming

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passenger. At 12:04 another outward bound flyer roared past.

Baron dozed fitfully throughout the night, and shortly before eleven in the morning he heard voices outside the door. A key clicked and Distasio came in with a blindfold.

"Gotta put him on," he said stolidly. When he had finished he added, "Hokay," and began to untie Baron while two men came into the room.

Vince's voice announced, "The check was good."

Baron did not answer, did not say a word until he was shoved out of the car twenty minutes later and felt the slush of a pavement under his feet.

By the time he got the blindfold off, a small black sedan was disappearing around a corner. Mentally tabulating the number, he glanced about a deserted narrow street lined on both sides by squalid tenements; then set out for the corner at a brisk walk, buttoning his coat at the neck over the stiff shirt-front of his dinner jacket.

There was a drug store two blocks away and Baron borrowed a pencil and began to jot down a column of figures, his eyes thoughtful under knotted brows. When he had finished he stepped into a telephone booth.

"Harry," he said a moment later. "Paul Baron. Yeah. I've got a job."

"A cash job?" Harry's flip voice answered.

"A cash job. Meet me at the corner of Spruce and the Avenue, and you'd better bring a gun and a sap."

"You sound tough."

"Sometimes," Baron replied, "you gotta be tough."

"Okay," Harry said. "Anything you say as long as it doesn't cost me my license."

Harry Nixon was in his early thirties, a competent-looking fellow with reddish hair and greenish eyes that were very direct and naturally suspicious, as if he doubted everyone in particular and life in general. He was waiting on the corner when Baron's cab drew up, and when he climbed in he tossed over a folded newspaper, saying, "Have you seen it yet?"

Baron read one paragraph and his face grew taut. He cursed just once, a vehement, bitter curse, and said, "So the police, led by Assistant District Attorney Powers, found the missing bonds in my apartment. They crossed me."

Nixon said, "Want to tell me about it?" And when the taxi stopped in front of Alpert's apartment house five minutes later he had the story.

Baron did not bother to knock at the fourth floor door. He tried the knob, found the door unlocked, and pushed into the living room with Nixon at his heels. Nixon closed the door and they both stood there a moment silently.

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"Well," Nixon said finally, "they got Frankie out. That's a help."

He crossed to an inner doorway, disappeared around the corner of the hall. Baron followed absently, lost in the turmoil of his thoughts, until he reached the bedroom. Then Nixon said one word, in a long exhalation.

Frankie Alpert was crumpled in a heap at the side of the bed. A blood-spattered sheet partly covered the body, as if he had grabbed it as he fell; and there was more blood on the carpet opposite an ugly hole in the back of his head. Nixon moved slowly forward. He stopped beside the body, turned to fix cold doubting eyes on Baron.

"Now I know why us private dicks get such bad reps," he said finally. "It's playin' around with guys like you."

Baron moved before Nixon finished. A look of bewilderment twisted his lean face, but his actions were crisp and purposeful. Three long strides took him to a closet. He jerked open the door and began to paw over the suits that hung there. When he turned around his jaw was slack.

"It's gone! That gray suit he had on last night." He wet his lips, dropped down on the bed, spoke in a dull monotone. "Somebody pulled a job like that about six months back. A blank cartridge and some ketchup. The sucker bit. There was no motive, but he was ignorant and fell for it.

"So did I. Only they rigged it right. They put a hole in the suit and stained the cloth around the hole. Frankie played dead and they stuck me up before I could touch him. And Frankie tied in with those bonds. It was those planted bonds that had me worried most. Hell, what a setup!"

"Something went sour," Nixon offered. "It looks like a straight plant to me. They wanted your dough. They'd've taken the bonds too. Even if they were hot. And today Frankie'd been alive and what could you do? You couldn't squawk. There'd be no proof. Nobody'd believe you, and you'd only show yourself up for a sap.

"Only somebody muffed it. Maybe the cops beat 'em to your place and they couldn't get the bonds back." Nixon went to one knee beside Alpert's body, lifted an arm.

"This guy ain't been dead long!" he rapped.

Baron stood up, circled the bed. His face was dark now and there was a bad look in his eyes.

"I'm no doctor," Nixon added quickly. "But he isn't stiff yet. He hasn't been gone more'n a couple hours. Three at the most."

He stood up, shook his head. He looked at Baron and when he spoke his voice was quiet, regretful, but very firm.

"Right now this looks a lot tougher than the frame. I believe you because I know you; but a lot of people won't. I'll play if I

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can, but I've had my license quite a while and I'd like to hang on to it. What're you going to do?"

Baron looked right at Nixon and there wasn't much expression in his face. Just a tightness to the mouth and two reddish spots on his cheekbones.

"I've got one chance. If I find the house and get the Distasio punk I'll maybe have an alibi for this kill."

He took an envelope from his pocket, the envelope with the figures scribbled on the back, and handed it to Nixon. "There's plenty of lead."

"It looks like a puzzle to me."

"The street is cobblestone," Baron said grimly. "I think it ends beside the railroad right-of-way; anyway the trains go pretty close. Outbound passengers passed it at 10:34 and 12:04. Check with the dispatcher and find out exactly where the Ten-thirty and the Midnight Limited should be at that time.

"The window is barred. Walk the right-of-way and see if you can spot it. If you get the street you'll get the house. Six stone steps"—Baron traced his finger down the numbers on the envelope—"two paces to a vestibule. Inside you'll smell banana oil—maybe the radiators have just been painted. There's eighteen steps to the second floor, right turn, four paces, fifteen steps to the third floor, and twelve paces to a door on the left."

Baron hesitated, eyes grave. "There's five hundred bucks in it for you if you find it."

"That's one part I can understand," Nixon said. "And what's *your* play?"

"I'm going to take a chance and see the D. A. before some cop gets the idea of trying to drag me in. Forget Alpert. If they find him now, they'll hold me without bail and I'll be washed up. If he stays covered up here, I might get some time to work."

District Attorney Wardman tapped a gold pencil in staccato measures on the desk top and listened patiently to Baron's carefully selected story. He was a big man, plump, but carrying his weight well in a stiffly dignified way. His gray hair was thin on top and thin-rimmed glasses framed his dark eyes. When Baron finished, he took a cigar from a heavy humidor and began to manicure the end.

"It's pretty hard to believe," he said, without looking up. "Somebody kidnaps you, makes you write a check, and promises to recover the bonds planted in your apartment. The bonds aren't recovered because Powers comes back with the police in time to get them."

"That's the only way it can be figured," Baron said, "unless they wanted the plant to stick, and I don't think that was in the act."

"And what do you want me to do?"

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"Call off the bloodhounds for a few hours and give me a chance to find that house."

Wardman rolled the unlighted cigar around his mouth, then cleared his throat.

"That's a lot to ask, Baron. You admit you can't identify the men behind this—except the one in the house. And planted or not, the bonds were found in your place. Against this fact you offer me a completely unverified story."

Baron stood up and opened his coat. The stiff shirt-front was stained with spots of blood from the wound over his ear. His jaw was still swollen; his dinner jacket was badly wrinkled; his unshaven face was hard and angry.

"Do I look as if I was clowning?"

Wardman rolled the cigar some more.

Baron stepped to the desk, put his hands down flat, and leaned forward, holding his weight on his stiffened arms. His voice was cold and reasonable, and he didn't look young any more.

"Then put it another way. I didn't have to come here, but I came. All right, pinch me. What will it get you? On the bond charge they'll have to set bail. I'll get out anyway. But if I have to do it that way, and I crack this thing—and I will—you're going to take one hell of a riding, Wardman. These next few hours are the ones I want. Let me have them and tomorrow morning you can have your inning—if you need it."

Baron was hard to doubt when he talked like that. Wardman frowned, put the cigar on the edge of an ashtray, clasped his hands on the desk, and stared at them, pushing his lips in and out. Then he picked up the cigar and set his jaws firmly on it.

"Be here at nine o'clock tomorrow morning," he said brusquely. "It's a hell of a funny way for me to be doing my job, but I'd rather give you a few more hours now than have you bellyache afterward."

Baron stopped at the door. "And keep Powers off my back."

"He's all right in his way," Wardman said defensively.

"In a nasty way, yeah," and Baron left.

It was quite dark when Baron got out of his taxi at the corner of Marshall and Grove Streets shortly after six o'clock. The air was crisp with a still cold, and Harry Nixon had his chin down in his coat and was stamping his feet on the curb while he waited. As Baron paid the driver, another cab slid past and Nixon's alert eyes studied it narrowly, watched it pull into the curb in the middle of the block.

"Looks like you had a town dick on your trail," he said dryly, nodding toward a thick-set fellow who got out of the cab and sauntered across the walk to peer into a lighted jewelry store.

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Baron said, "Come on," and stepped into the drugstore.

Presently the thick-set man sauntered past the windows and crossed the street. Baron muttered something down in his throat, said, "Go tell him he might as well come inside where it's warm."

Nixon went out. Baron stepped into a telephone booth and called Police Headquarters.

"If I've got to have a tail," he said caustically when he had identified himself, "I might as well have somebody I like. Send Hanauer if he's there. I'll wait for him and you can call this other guy off." He gave the address of the drugstore and hung up.

The plain-clothesman came in with Nixon and said hello a bit sheepishly. Then the three of them moved over to the soda counter and drank coffee and waited for about twenty-five minutes until Hanauer popped out of a taxi and came inside.

The plain-clothesman went to meet him, said something, and went out. Hanauer came over grinning. "What's the deal?" he asked.

Baron tried to return the grin but his face couldn't quite make it. He liked Hanauer. They had worked together before, and Baron knew he was a good cop. He was short, stocky, with a lot of shoulders and a broad, squarish face. He'd been in the game a long time, knew the percentages, and was never tough unless he had to be; then he was pretty good at it.

"I'd rather have you along than that other guy, that's all," Baron grumbled.

"It's all right with me, Paul," Hanauer said.

"Where's this place?" Baron asked Nixon.

"Four blocks down—by the railroad just as you thought."

Baron went out to the sidewalk and climbed in his taxi which had waited, unasked, at the curb. Nixon got in, and when Hanauer hesitated, Baron said, "Come on. There's no sense in hiring two cabs. The taxpayers get stuck enough as it is."

Nixon lit a cigarette and said, "Now I know why you were first-grade so soon. The train time gave me the start, and from the right-of-way there was only one place with barred windows. You had everything on the nose; steps, banana oil—hell, even the radiators had just been painted."

Hanauer said, "Do I just ride, or can I talk too. What is this anyway?"

Baron related the same story he had given the District Attorney. "And if I'm lucky," he finished, "maybe we'll get enough to satisfy Wardman."

The radio beyond the door to the left of the narrow stairway was still tuned to a dance band; and again the smell of banana oil was in Baron's throat, resurrecting the

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memory of the night before. Anger and resentment smoldered inside him as he moved to the stairs.

He counted the steps automatically as he went up ahead of Hanauer and Nixon. The turn at the top, the next flight, then the walk to the rear of the hall. Hanauer got his gun out and shifted it to his overcoat; Nixon unbuttoned his suit coat.

"Let me—" Hanauer began.

Baron caught the detective's fist as he raised it to knock. Shaking his head he said softly, "I want to be sure and get in." Three quick knocks and two slow ones had gained entrance the night before and he repeated them now, stepping back slightly as he finished.

Beyond the door there was no sound for several seconds; then a knob turned. When the turning stopped Baron hit the panel with his right shoulder.

The door swung open, bounced back from the man who started to open it. Baron kept his feet, kept driving in until he fell over Distasio who was sitting on the floor, wide-eyed, blood coming from his flat nose where the edge of the door had smacked him.

Distasio scrambled to his feet, and Baron helped him, pushing him off balance until he had the fellow backed against the wall. After that, Baron forgot himself.

He was not ordinarily vindictive. His disposition was naturally good-humored and as a cop he had been tolerant of many things. He was not exactly vindictive now. Rather his assault was simply the release of emotions that had been pent up and futile—and he was young.

He hit Distasio with a straight left and the fellow swung back. Baron stepped inside the punch and rocked the close-cropped head with a right cross. He was still boring in when Hanauer grabbed him and yelled, "Take it easy. If this is the guy, all right. But I got a job and a family."

Baron stepped back and dropped his hands. He was breathing hard, his face still twisted with rage.

"This is the guy," he said.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Distasio said, wiping his nose.

"Never saw me before, huh?"

Distasio shook his head and his little eyes were savage. "No."

"I was never in here, was I?"

"No."

Baron told Hanauer to go see if there was a barred room in the flat, and when Hanauer came back and said there was, Baron continued with biting directness.

"Remember what he says, Steve. It's important. And you're a witness. He says I was never here before. You heard him." He glanced at Distasio. "But a fingerprint man will prove differently. If I wasn't here I couldn't leave prints. I haven't touched anything but the doorknob. But last night I put both hands on the window of

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that inner room. Those prints'll prove my story."

He grunted, measuring Distasio. 'You know now, don't you? You know what kidnapers get, don't you? Now who hired you? Or are you going to take the rap alone and have your bones rot in a cell where you—"

Distasio's reaction caught Baron flat-footed. It was a sort of spontaneous explosion of movement where he did two things at once: he yelled, "You better come!" and he lowered his head and charged, both fists swinging.

After that the sequence was blurred for Baron. The first punch caught him high on the chest, spun him around, and thereby saved his life when a gun cracked and a slug spattered into the wall a foot from his head.

He didn't know where the shot came from, and he had no time to look. He ducked Distasio's second swing. As he got his chin behind his shoulder and braced himself to meet the man's charge, a voice cracked, "Get Mario, Harry!" Then the room rocked with the roar of guns fired in two distinct salvos.

Baron had to keep working on the raging Distasio. He struck twice with his left, trying to get away. He had his right cocked when Hanauer said, "Get 'em up, mister!"

Distasio stopped, stiffened. His gaze slid past Baron, widened, became fixed. When his hands began to lift, Baron turned around.

Hanauer stood in the center of the room, his feet wide apart and his service revolver pointed at Distasio. Nixon was lowering a .38 automatic and watching a far corner of the room. A closet door stood open here, and on the floor, wedging the door, was the slumped figure of Vince. Leaning against the wall, arms hanging limply, was a slender, olive-skinned man. There was an automatic on the floor beside his left shoe.

Nobody said anything. There wasn't a sound but the slender man's loud, labored breathing. Nixon kept watching him. Vince lay very still. He was on his face and stomach, and a red stain spread quickly over the floor beside his head. Blood began to drip from the slender man's fingers and he lifted the hand and stared at it curiously; then he moved the hand to his chest and clamped it there. Finally he pushed out from the wall, staggered a step forward, and flopped into a chair.

Baron shook himself. "What a break," he said thinly, looking at Hanauer, "that I decided to let you ride with us. They were in the closet, huh?"

Hanauer nodded. "When the guy yelled I guess they thought they'd better make their play. They knew he'd squawk if they didn't." Hanauer took a breath and picked up his felt hat which had been parted

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at the crown by a jagged furrow. "I happened to have my hand on my gun, and the big guy wasted his first shot at you." He stole a glance at Nixon. "You're pretty handy with that gun of yours, too."

He backed away, told Nixon to watch Distasio, and turned to the slender man.

"How's it, Mario? The chest?"

"I'm through," the man said weakly. "If you got any questions you'd better spring 'em."

Baron went quickly to Mario's side. But it was Mario who spoke first.

"We weren't going to cross you," he said. "All we wanted was the dough. But the cops beat us to it, and then—"

"Start at the beginning," Baron urged. "You're the guy Powers and I caught—the one who pulled the gun on me three months ago."

"Yeah," Mario said. He lifted dull eyes toward Hanauer. "He's right. I had the gun and I'd've plugged him if he rushed me. Vince and I pulled the Brewer job. Alpert handled the stuff for us. We framed you last night and when the cops got the bonds there was nothing to do but go through with it. We were gonna take the 25 G's and grab a powder."

"And you rubbed out Alpert?"

"Alpert!" Hanauer echoed. "When? How do *you* know, Paul?"

Baron explained quickly and Hanauer's eyes got serious and reproachful. His voice was sour. "You held out."

"And so would you!" Baron argued. "Where'd I be if you knew before? In the clink! You ought to be glad that—"

"All right, all right," Hanauer said grudgingly.

"That wasn't in the act either," Mario choked out. "But after we got the dough this morning, Frankie wanted half—because he lost the bonds. He tried to pull a gun and Vince let him have it."

"Where's the dough now?" Baron asked.

"We turned it over to a mouthpiece in case we got caught. We were gonna hide here till tonight and then—"

"What mouthpiece?"

"Kohler."

"Dan Kohler," Hanauer said. And then Baron knew why the plump man in the mask had been familiar the night before.

"He was in on it, too?"

"He didn't have anything to do with the bonds," Mario protested. "He just worked for Alpert, and when Alpert got the idea of a frame, Kohler helped rig the setup."

Hanauer grunted, "Well, I guess that does it." He looked down at Mario who had slumped in the chair, and felt for a pulse. "He's still alive. If we get him to a hospital maybe he'll sign a statement. But anyway you're clean, Paul."

"Clean," Baron repeated, and there was a new note in his voice.

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"For the first time in three months I can forget those damned bonds."

"Yeah," Hanauer said. "Well, I guess that's everything."

"Not quite," Baron said. "I've got to see Kohler."

"He can wait," Hanauer said. "He ain't important now. An accessory to extortion but even that'll be hard to prove. Maybe he'll get disbarred but—"

"That part can wait," Baron said. "But I'm no Big Time Charlie. He's got my twenty-five grand and I want it, and if I don't get tough and collect, every grafter in town will lay awake nights figuring out how to take me."

When Baron passed his apartment house on the way downtown, he saw a big coupé parked at the curb and told the taxi driver to stop. Janet Grainger was sitting in a wing chair when he came into the room.

Without moving she looked at him in a moment of study. Her eyes remained anxious, but she did not ask for details; she just said, "I was worried. Are you all right?"

Baron nodded.

"But you're not going to Florida with us tomorrow?"

"I can't. I'll have to stay around a few days. Maybe I can fly down later."

He stepped toward her, stopped beside the chair. He was not a pretty sight. His shirt was ruined, his clothing was rumpled, and his face was sweat-streaked and dirty. In spite of this he looked young again and his eyes were smiling.

"Still like me?" he asked.

"Yes," Janet Grainger said. "But don't ask me why. We had a date tonight, didn't we?"

"Oh—" Baron looked concerned.

"And it's my last night and I think it would be nice if—"

"If I skip the shower," Baron cut in, "I can be ready in about seven minutes."

"Skip the shower."

It was exactly seven minutes when Baron came back to the living room. His face glistened with a freshly scrubbed look—except for the lump on his jaw—and he was immaculate in a dark-gray suit. "I've got one more call to make," he said, "but it won't take long."

Baron kidded good-naturedly with the night elevator boy on the way up to the third floor of the office building on Congress Street, and he walked down the marble-floored corridor with a faint whistle on his lips.

Dan Kohler was barricaded behind a massive flat-topped desk and when Baron swung into the room without knocking, he looked up angrily and half rose from his chair. For just a moment he held the pose, big body bent, mouth gaping, and sudden alarm mirroring from his eyes; then a frown slashed into his thick-looking skin as he said blusteringly:

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"Hello, Baron. What's on your mind?"

Baron came up to the desk.

"Dough," he said blithely.

"Dough?" parroted Kohler uneasily.

"Twenty-five thousand bucks."

"Don't be silly."

"What's silly about that kind of money? And I'm in a hurry. We've got Vince and Mario and I want the money they passed on to you."

"I haven't any money," Kohler protested. Then, blustering again, "And if I had I couldn't give it to you. It'd be clients' money—"

"Listen," Baron cut in curtly. "Right now I'm in a good humor. Don't spoil it. I've had a hard day, and I'm still a little irritable. If I've gotta be tough, okay. But don't rib me about my own dough. You haven't any clients' money. Vince and Mario are dead."

As he finished, Baron reached for a brief case that lay on the desk. He picked it up, started to unstrap it. Then he got another surprise. Kohler had a Sunday punch. He let it go as he growled and came from the chair, and it started from the floor and ended solidly right over Baron's left eye.

Baron wasn't hurt much, but there was power behind the blow and he was knocked back and nearly went down. Kohler yanked open a drawer. Baron charged forward in time to slap the gun to the floor as it flashed upward. He was still smiling as he leaped around the corner of the desk. He ducked another right, jabbed a left twice, and as Kohler straightened up, caught him with a right hook.

Kohler went down on his haunches and sat there like a Buddha, blinking dull eyes. Baron tried to lift him, but the fellow was pretty heavy, so he let him sit there and picked up the brief case.

The money was inside, in five-hundred-dollar bills. There was also a black mask.

"Thanks for my dough," Baron said, backing toward the door. "I'll take the mask too, and then you won't need a receipt."

Janet Grainger looked at Baron curiously as he got in the coupé.

"It didn't take you long. Is everything all right?"

"Everything is fine."

"And we're really having a date?"

"Well—" Baron snapped on the dome light and grinned as he pointed to his left eye which had a very definite bluish cast at the outside corner. "Can I go this way?" he said hopefully.

Janet Grainger cocked her head in a gesture of mock study. She held the pose for another second or two, smiling just a little, lips parted, eyes shining. Then she leaned forward and kissed him gently on the bruised eye.

"Why not?" she said, settling back on the seat. "Bring the eye along too."

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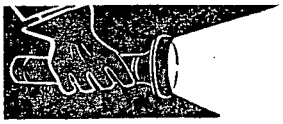

BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

I don't know which is the greater pleasure in reading: to discover a completely unheralded new talent, or to find an old favorite in absolute top form. This fortunate month provides both delights, in two five-star books among the best of this (or any) year.

★★★★★ **THE FINISHING STROKE, *by Ellery Queen*** (Simon & Schuster, $3.50)
E. Q. (detective) returns to his salad days in a fondly detailed narrative of 1929. E. Q. (author) returns to the splendid artifice of elaborate deduction which no one else has mastered half so well, creating a uniquely Queenish challenge in bizarre puzzlement.

★★★★★ **THE WOMAN IN THE WOODS, *by Lee Blackstock*** (Crime Club, $2.95)
Impact of death of stranger on lives in English village is strongly plotted and powerfully written, with masterly construction, depth and insight in character creation, and a chilling sense of the skull beneath the skin. Debut of a major contender.

★★★★ **SINGING IN THE SHROUDS, *by Ngaio Marsh*** (Little, Brown, $3.50)
One of ten passengers on the London-Cape Town freighter is a mad mass-murderer; another is Superintendent Roderick Alleyn. Polished telling, devious clue-planting make a fine classic puzzle . . . despite a shocking lack of editing.

★★★ **THE NARROW SEARCH, *by Andrew Garve*** (Harper, $2.95)
Novel and enchanting background of life on Shropshire canals lends charm to story of a strange new kind of kidnaping.

★★★ **THE THREE-TIME LOSERS, *by George Bagby*** (Crime Club, $2.95)
Striking economy in number of characters and span of time makes this one of the tightest of the enviably professional cases of Inspector Schmidt.

Reprints: Avon digs back farther than most houses for historic items that may be new to many readers. The latest (35¢ each): Agatha Christie's THE SECRET ADVERSARY (1922) and THE REGATTA MYSTERY (short stories, 1939); Rex Stout's CASE OF THE RED BOX (1937).

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **EDWIN A. GROSS**

TITLE: ***The Li'l Sharpsnooper***

TYPE: Humorous Crime Story

LOCALE: Menlo Park, California

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Ten-year-old Vernice was a holy terror. She had eyes that saw the unseeable, ears that heard the unhearable, and a mind that imagined the unimaginable . . .*

I WANT TO TELL THIS IN MY OWN way. That is, the story of how I, William H. (Bill) Hilbert of Menlo Park, Calif., formerly of Newark, N. J. and the Army Signal Corps, confessed two murders.

I don't ask your sympathy, though perhaps I deserve it. Merely your understanding . . .

I was lying on the divan in the living room, enjoying my temporary "bachelorhood" and reading an editorial in the newspaper. It was about guided missiles and I tried to focus my worries on international law and scientists; but as usual I wound up shaking my head about business—about how to advertise our agency's new sports line (miracle-fiber sweaters and skirts).

I peeked at my watch. 2:59 Saturday afternoon. I poked a button. A radio voice began droning its familiar theme of disaster. So far the day had hatched a suicide on—or off—the Golden Gate Bridge, a south-of-Panama rebellion, a whopping traffic toll, a forest fire, and an earthquake, exact location unknown. A huckster of used cars took a crack at me next. "If your credit's good—and I'm sure it is!—" he yelped, "you can grab any one of our top values!"

I poked again.

I wasn't due anywhere till supper, when I was eating at my insurance agent's colonial, having dined at my dentist's ranch-style the night before.

I yawned. Then I heard voices at the door of my nondescript—children's voices.

"Dotty, try the knob."

"Oh, no, not me. You."

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"I'll ring."

It was Vernice Cory, in a cerise jumper and white blouse, and a freckled-faced friend. I can't remember what the friend was wearing.

Vernice is a ten-year-old who lives two blocks away on Creek Drive. Pat, my wife, once labeled her "Number One Northern California neighborhood sharpsnooper." She often played with Beverly, our five-year-old, when we first moved to suburbia—undoubtedly to find out about our household—then tapered off. She's extremely polite with adults, though I've overheard her snap at a tot. Vernice's father has always seemed a hard-working draftsman, her mother a mousy clubwoman, and her brother a Little Leaguer who tricycles about his own business. Until this Saturday I hadn't much more than nodded to Vernice.

Now I'm trying *hard* to describe this little brat without rancor. She's a slender, erect ash-blonde with thin lips and front uppers verging on the ample. Her turquoise eyes are her most noticeable feature, and at first they seem merely lucid, alert, and intelligent. One soon realizes, though, that here are orbs that are too aware—much too aware. They don't penetrate, they skedaddle; they don't see, they skim.

"Hi, there!" I said with my best I-recognize-you-little-girl grin.

Vernice's voice was completely self-possessed. "How are you, Mr. Hilbert. This is my friend Dorothy Ott." Child of the Ott who runs the hardware store, I surmised.

"Hi, Dotty," I said. "Down, Fritz." My dog, who was nuzzling them for petting, obeyed.

"May we have a drink of water?" Vernice asked.

"Sure," I said cordially. "Come in." Her request seemed oddly innocuous. Well, I guessed, my house was as good as another if you didn't want to walk home.

They glided through the front door, which opens almost directly into the living room. I crossed to the kitchen, aware of being followed without an invitation, and filled two glasses.

"Thank you verra much," Vernice purred, her eyes and hand reaching out contrariwise. Dotty just smiled a bit vapidly. There was no doubt who was the leader. "Mr. Hilbert," pursued Vernice. "Where's Beverly?"

"In Bayonne," I said. "Bayonne, New Jersey. With her mother."

"Oh, really?" Vernice said. Her inspection slipped along the stove. From pot to pot, from burner to burner, from oven to oven. "Gee, I knew I hadn't seen her around." Her eyes cruised the sherry jug in the pantry. "Gee, the li'l darling never told us she was going."

"Is that so?" I said, barely choking back the explanation that we'd withheld the news from Bev to prevent overexcitement.

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"Must be lonely in this big house all by yourself. Or don't you mind?"

"Only six rooms," I said. "Besides, there's the dog."

"When did they go?"

"Wednesday."

"Oh. Ohh?"

"Wednesday night."

"Ohh? Mark told me he hasn't seen Bev around for days."

"Kindergartener's sense of time," I said jocularly.

Vernice put her glass down half full, then fondled it. She was ogling the stains on my T-shirt and slacks. I felt impaled as I visualized a sign: C-L-U-E. I could see it flickering on and off, like a neon light in her mind.

"Berries," I said, patting a spot above my belt. "From the backyard."

"They're ripe?" Skeptical, very skeptical.

"I like them hard—and a little sour. I picked a whole bowlful. Through?"

"Oh, no." Her busy hand raised the glass.

"They're delish with yogurt," I added. The picture of her straight lips puckering over a sour dish somehow pleased me.

"Yogurt?"

"Kind of milk. Got lots of vitamins."

"I've seen it advertised on TV," Dorothy said.

I was playing the expansive householder again. *Surely* I had been too sensitive to a normal prying kid. "Keeps me feeling fine. See, when you're baching, you take the easy way. I exist on baloney, blood-sausage—uh—and drive-ins and tobacco." I smiled, but found no empathy.

I smiled again, wishing my features were more fluid. Vernice's eyes were still patrolling. It was ridiculous, but they had brought out nodules of sweat on my brow and I was on the verge of babbling. Expansive householder had become uneasy one.

I concentrated on the bridge of Vernice's nose, a trick I learned in my own childhood. People think you are trading stares.

"Where did they go?"

"To Bayonne. Near New York."

Vernice nodded. Her folks, I suppose, had an atlas.

"Why did they go?"

"It's Beverly's grandfather's seventieth birthday. There'll be a big celebration. A party."

"When will they be back?"

"Can't say. Couple of weeks, I guess. You know, only grandchild and all that."

"How did they go?"

"By air."

"San Francisco?"

"No, Oakland."

"That's funny," Vernice said.

The words had been unmistakable. I scraped the drainboard with a fingernail. Should I explain about non-scheds? Might seem irrational to a non-wage-earner to add extra

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mileage just to save fare. But why utter another syllable in front of young Miss Hawkshaw, anyway?

"Was cheaper," I husked, and blushed.

Vernice rinsed and dried both glasses.

"It sure is funny she didn't tell anybody," she grilled on. "When did you say they left?"

"Wednesday night," I repeated loudly. My insteps, uncompressed in my loafers, felt weak and tingly.

"This is certainly a bee-yoo-tiful house," Vernice said. She nudged Dorothy and they preceded me to the living room. "I went all through it when the Meades lived here. Before the extra room was added. I'd love to see it again. We have oceans of time. I just *love* Beverly's li'l room." Her eyes tried to romp around the corner.

"It *was* Bev's room," I said. *Now why on earth had I—?* I rated a booby hatch. Some unconscious craving for self-destruction, maybe. "It's our family room now. Bev's sleeping around the other way. That is—uh—has been." My voice trailed off.

I hoped my back was luring them toward the front door. I imagined I could see Vernice's eyes reflected in the knob. Floating in a nimbus of guilt, round-shouldered and awkward, I reached for it.

"Where are your guppies?" She was craning toward the fish bowl on the mantel.

"Thought you knew, Vernice. They died a few weeks ago." Was I sounding casual? "There are still snails in there."

She frowned and before she retreated from the fireplace, I am pretty sure she sniffed.

The open door framed one of Fritzie's bones. It loomed from the lawn, ominous and ugly.

"So long," I said. Vernice's eyes shuttled from the bone to me to Dorothy and back to the bone. Then suddenly my visitors breezed out.

I closed the door gently. The calves of my legs felt lumpy and one lone chill skated down my spine.

What a zany I was! Vernice was a mere child, even if a generation up on me. Still, I was right not to have been rude. After all, we were practically neighbors. In a small suburb.

Fortunately, she'd had no excuse to ferret through the house. Obsolete dentures in a medicine chest—what would she have made of them? And the whole place was in unsuburban disarray. "Maid comes twice a week," I could hear myself stammering. Sweet Jerusalem—hadn't Bev left some messy doll's hair on her chifferobe? Say, Fritzie's bone couldn't possibly have been a—a—*human's*, could it? I *had* picked berries, hadn't I?

I hurried outside. There were berries on the bushes, plenty of them. I chucked Fritzie's bone into the garbage can.

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I returned to a prone position on the divan, puzzling where a subteen had acquired such skill at third degree. Then I recalled a well-publicized local murder trial. Could be Vernice had the grisly details on her mind. Me, too.

Drowsily I wondered whether Vernice and her stooge would steal around to the backyard and case the bushes . . .

Well, I dreamed of Vernice. We were in a prison yard listening to a popular rock 'n' roll yowler. I was beating time by rapping skulls together till suddenly a Martian came up and sliced off both my legs with a meat cleaver. Then Vernice started nursing me. She had a magic potion to make the legs grow back quickly. Then she cut them off again. This happened so often I was ready to yell, "Leave 'em off!"—when I awoke in a cold sweat to find my feet, unloafered, dangling from the divan.

No doubt about it. Vernice and I were both preoccupied with violence.

I did my calisthenics intently—all of them—shaved, showered, dressed, and drove to my insurance agent's colonial. I hoped he wouldn't seize the opportunity to talk about mortality tables (but he did). I hoped he wouldn't make dire prophecies about a third world war (but his mother-in-law did).

I reached home at 10:59. The radio announcer reported a near-record traffic toll, a typhoon in the Philippines, and an infant who had sampled insecticide. He assured me that more calamities would be reported in exactly 57 minutes. I studied a photo of Pat and Bev, then to bed . . .

Well, I dreamed again. This time Vernice was afloat on an iceberg. She was dressed half like an Eskimo, half like a witch in blood-red silk. She was stabbing away at a peak with a penknife, determined to reach absolute bottom.

I awoke shivering, shut the window, shuffled into Bev's room, and jammed her doll's wig into a toy chest.

At about 10:30 the next morning Vernice rang my door chime. I was unshaved and hyperconscious of the fact that the shirt and trousers of my pajamas didn't match.

"Good morning, Mr. Hilbert," she said gravely. "Would you like your Sunday paper?"

"Thanks," I grumped. My lady Eskimo looked deceptively sweet in a coral-pink cardigan.

"Can I trouble you for some water?"

"What a thirst!" I thought of snarling, but I just grinned.

I dumped the paper on a table. Vernice tracked me implacably to the kitchen. Where was Dorothy? Was the crime already sculptured enough for the lieutenant to leave her sergeant on guard outside?

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"Need a cigarette," I muttered, slouching into the living room. Yep. I could spy Dorothy through the pyracantha hedge out front.

How far these private eyes might go I didn't dare imagine. It was easy to conceive of Vernice picking a lock tomorrow while I was in San Francisco. If Fritzie didn't bite her. If only he weren't used to her!

"You said they'd be gaw-onn—but how long, Mr. Hilbert?" Vernice innocently asked on my return.

"Who?" I rasped, knowing.

"Bev and . . . Pat, isn't it?"

"A couple of weeks."

"I see."

What control!

"Vernice," I said testily. "Honey. How long a vacation do your folks take?"

"One week. And we all go together."

Vernice raised her glass as if she'd chalked up a point. Our eyes clinched. For a second she seemed undecided how to proceed—or was this merely her technique? She stalked me to the living room. A few more steps and she'd be gone.

Vernice ogled the fireplace, the poker, the fish bowl, the mobile, the bookcase. "Do you read comics and things like that, Mr. Hilbert?"

"The funny papers," I said, thinking to curry favor. "Oh—and Bev's comic books. Well, real nice to have seen you—"

"Do you go to the movies much?"

"Oh, not so much."

"My mother says the trashy ones give some people bad ideas." Was this confidence meant to lower my defenses? "I always say, they don't bother me."

"Swell."

"How about church, Mr. Hilbert? You go, I suppose?"

"Oh, now and then. More'n a lot of people. I have an uncle who's a minister," I said.

Primly Vernice parked on the edge of an armchair, smoothing her skirt. Her eyes roamed around me.

"I so like to talk with grown-ups. I ast so many people this. Mr. Hilbert, what keeps you from going wrong? From going into crime, fr'instance."

"I was brought up well," I said lamely. "And I have a conscience. Look here, sis, do you quiz your daddy like this?"

"My daddy's dead," Vernice said evenly. "He got killed in the Air Force. I live with my stepdaddy."

"Had no idea. Sorry," I said. "I bet your daddy was a wonderful man."

"Will Mrs. Hilbert write you often?"

I aimed for a polite tone. "About twice a week. Mail will come to my office. Uh—I may sleep in the city sometimes."

"Mrs. Hilbert is a delightful person. I'm verra fond of her. Do you like her verra much?"

"Gosh, yes. I love her. Now

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scram, kiddo, I've got an appointment."

As Vernice slipped by an ashtray, I gave thanks that no lipstick stained my butts and that all were filter-tipped. She'd found no triangular clues yet—so far as I knew.

"'Bye," I said.

Vernice drew her lips and cheeks into a smile.

As the door closed behind her, my stomach convoluted, allowing a grand release. I shut the venetian blind, and yelled for joy—silently.

Hilly, you are mad! I told myself, tapping my forehead with a fist. Kowtowing to a precocious child! Hamming the role of a murderer that she's cast you in! They *were* a lamb bone and a doll's wig. Blackberries *do* stain purplish red. Pat did send a telegram on her arrival. Or was the wire an illusion? Or a berserk trick you yourself pulled?

I dug my teeth into a knuckle. Everything was clear, of course. To Vernice I spelled fulfillment. I was her own, her very own newfound murder case. She thought she was dipping her feet into the big river of crime—the blood bath . . .

I dressed and went out to water the window box. Maybe the sun would bleach my sooty mood. Mark triked by, chasing a contemporary with a tommygun. "That's Beverly's daddy!" he trilled. Good old Mark!

I quick-lunched at a drug store, watched tennis in the park, nodded to acquaintances, took a dip in the public pool, and walked home refreshed. But at the mailbox I resorted to tiptoeing.

I slipped into the house quietly and almost immediately spied Vernice through a breakfast-nook window. She was in the backyard, kicking gently at a hole between the clothesline and the iris beds. I remembered it well. Fritzie had been clawing at it recently. The dog squatted near her, watching her attentively.

Vernice stooped. "Looking for buried treasure?" I wanted to shout.

Well, I'd swear Vernice didn't see me, but suddenly she scooted off. Instead of cutting down the driveway, she faded into a back lot.

After supper I burned more lights than were really needed. Didn't let Fritzie out with a bone, either.

Restlessly I tried a TV program, then a book, then both together. It was about that time I actually considered getting in touch with the police. But what for? I hadn't done anything wrong. I wasn't really afraid of Vernice. Or was I?

I drank hot milk, tried relaxing in a warm bath, and almost convinced myself to stop worrying. If Vernice stepped too far out of line, I could always set matters straight. I could always write Pat, and then

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there'd be a letter from her soon. *Wouldn't there?*

That night I dreamed I was kneeling with corpses strewn all around. Vernice was towering over me, looking approvingly dour. She kept cooing, "See that, Mr. Hilbert. I knew you could do it if you'd just apply your mind to it." Then she started decomposing all my victims by means of atomic doodads. I woke up moaning.

3:36 A.M., said the dial. I huddled under my electric blanket, seriously considering an impulse to phone Pat. But wasn't I delirious? Who wants to seem loony to his wife? If only that haunted moppet would stop haunting me!

"Hilly, snap out of it," I murmured. "You've got to go to work in the morning."

Agitated sleep at last took over . . .

As soon as I raised the shade, Fritzie's hole caught my eye. Then came a hunch, a whim—a conviction almost. I dashed outside. I checked for the bone I'd thrown in the garbage on Saturday. It was gone!

I felt truculent and vindictive. And worried. Hey, what if Fritzie *had* buried some bones in his hole?

Assuring myself I was stable, and was just trying to prove myself sane about the situation, I dug down about six inches. I found only worms. I inserted a clothespin, filled the hole, and restored the surface. I laid another clothespin on top, weighting it down with a white-flecked rock. I almost missed the 8:02.

On the train I began speculating how far elderly German shepherds can dig. Fritzie might have cached something even deeper than I'd troweled. My previous satisfaction changed to a shiver.

The in-basket at the office contained a letter from Pat. No missive was ever more welcome. A ha for Vernice!

Pat wrote that she'd be staying in Bayonne three weeks, long enough to attend a school chum's wedding. On page two, under the typed "Bill dear, we love you!" and her signature, was "Beverly" in large, wobbly capitals.

The afternoon was hectic. My secretary quit, a machine broke down, and a copy writer reported drunk and was fired by the boss. I just did snare the 5:22. I carried a portfolio of layouts that I hoped to work on after napping and eating at a drive-in.

The suburbs were lovely, and there was bounce in my step as I walked home from the station.

Vernice was waiting, sitting on the curb under the apricot tree. I realized that I had expected her.

"Good evening, Mr. Hilbert," she said somberly, rising and straightening her teal-blue dress. Down the street I spotted a figure resembling Dorothy.

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"Hello, chickie," I said blithely. "How's every little thing?"

"Fine," Vernice said, watching me remove the day's bills from the mailbox. She had already riffled through them, of course.

"Oh, by the way," I said, struggling to be casual, "Mrs. Hilbert has written me. She says Beverly misses all her friends. Bev printed her name, too. Say, I may just happen to have that letter with me."

I whisked the letter out of my jacket pocket and handed it to her, tapping the bottom of page two. "Good for her age, isn't it?"

Vernice acted unsurprised. She took the pages, scanned them, and seemed to be studying the signatures.

Fritzie came lumbering down the driveway. I petted him. "Hi, fella," I chirped. "Lonesome today? Or did you have company?"

Vernice had tucked in the hems of her lips. "I can print like that with my left hand," she said, poker-faced.

"Yeah?" I said coldly.

"Do you have the envelope?"

"None of your damned business!" I wanted to blare. I tried to keep my hand from trembling as I took back the letter. "No. I guess I threw it away." It reminded me of the alibi of a hardened criminal. "You see, I know the return address," I added tactfully, hating myself for being a softie.

Managing a half smile, I folded the pages, pocketed them, and started across the lawn. I shut my eyes and flexed my fingers. How I hoped I wasn't being trailed!

"You're not a verra emotional person, are you?" Vernice purred right behind me.

"As the next one," I said matter-of-factly. Squeezing my fingers so they wouldn't shake, I fitted my key into the lock.

"Aren't you *ever* nervous?"

"Oh, yes!" I croaked. "Yes." I *was* nervous. Maybe I was also going nuts.

I stalked through the house and peeked out the breakfast-nook window. The clothespin and rock on Fritzie's hole were gone. Undoubtedly there had been a thorough investigation.

I wheeled on Vernice who was standing in the living room. "Sure, I'm nervous!" I jabbered. Then suddenly I couldn't stop myself. "Especially when talking to little girls! And cops! Especially little girl cops! Now please excuse me, *dear*." I glared. "I'm busy."

"You just got home," Vernice said levelly, sitting down. For further grilling?

"I mean I will be," I rasped. "Soon."

I plopped my portfolio on an end table, knocking over a lamp. Luckily I caught it.

I could envision her hammering away at me all night.

If there was one thing I was sure of, it was that I wanted to murder Vernice. With my bare hands. So

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maybe I *had* killed Pat and Bev. Maybe I had—

"Want any *water?*" I asked hoarsely, setting the lamp down on an ashtray, then finding the table.

"No, thank you," Vernice said. "You *are* nervous. You know, nerves are verra tricky things." The tone was one of relentless, hypnotic suggestion. "Sometimes people don't know what they do. Or have done."

I sat down on the divan. Just in time. My knees were quivering and they would have given way in another minute. Vernice was now standing.

Strangling, I thought, would be only fitting and proper. After all, people had killed precocious children before. Though usually to their dire discredit. Few in this case would sympathize with me, except possibly the child's mother. No, no. More likely, it would be her teachers.

Then before I knew it I was standing up, shrieking, "I did it! I did it! My God! I did it! *And I'll do it to you!*"

Vernice fled, leaving the door ajar. I flung it shut and stood panting, staring at the knob. "I did it!" I yelled at the fish bowl. "I did it!" I bellowed at the can opener. "I did it!" I pounded on the drainboard.

Staggering back into the living room, I flopped face down on the divan and closed my eyes. Then I jumped up, afraid I might fall asleep and dream.

Should I ring up Vernice's mother? No, not yet. Not till I was less unstrung. I would shave first, change my clothes, then dine heartily at a good restaurant.

Two policemen came right after I had taken a shower.

"A young lady phoned us," one said warily "Something about some trouble here. Something about your wife and child."

"That wacky kid," I laughed hollowly. "Did she think I was serious?"

The policeman frowned. "Just checking, sir. Where *is* your wife?"

"She's in New Jersey. Here, I'll phone her." He started to protest. "No. No, really," I insisted. "I've been meaning to, anyway. Hello, Operator . . ."

Early next morning I flew East on an emergency vacation. Pat swears she won't ever leave me in the suburbs again on my own.

And Vernice? Seeing her now, two months later, still makes me flinch. Oh, well. I live with guided missiles, I live with advertising, I live with the 8:02 and the 5:22. What's one more pressure in this modern life of ours?

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ELLERY QUEEN**

TITLE: ***A Question of Honor***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVES: Ellery Queen, mystery writer, and his father, Inspector Queen

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *If the man from Scotland Yard bungled it again, the resulting scandal would shake the foundations of the Empire . . . The Queens had good reason to worry.*

IT WASN'T EVERY DAY THAT ELLERY found himself meeting a policeman who was a minor authority on Shakespeare, and he shook the hand of Inspector Queen's British visitor with interest. It was a hard hand attached to a squared-off torso, satisfying the professional requirements; but above the neck Inspector Burke of New Scotland Yard took an unexpected turn — broad forehead, pale skin, and the bright, sad eyes of a scholar.

"Over here on a case, Inspector Burke?"

"Yes, and then again no," said the Scotland Yard man dourly. "'All hoods make not monks,' as Katherine points out in *Henry VIII*. I'm here hunting a bad one, right enough; but the thing is, he's waiting for me — and, what's more, when I catch the blighter I'm going to have to let him go."

"Why?" asked Ellery, astonished.

"Seems like a long trip, Burke," grinned Inspector Queen, "for mere exercise."

"'Necessity's sharp pinch,' gentlemen." The Englishman's sad eyes turned sharp. "It's rather a yarn. A certain young woman in London — daughter of someone very highly placed — is shortly to announce her betrothal to a man very much in the

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international eye. The principals are so distinguished that — well, the match couldn't have been made without the consent of Whitehall, which is all I'm free to say about it at this time.

"A year or so ago this girl, who is charming but headstrong and overromantic," continued the British policeman, "wrote seven highly indiscreet letters to a man with whom she was then infatuated.

"Now the position of the girl's fiancé is such that, should those letters get to him or become public knowledge, he would be forced to break the engagement, and the resulting scandal would almost certainly create a nasty diplomatic situation in an extremely sensitive political area. 'Great floods from simple sources,' you know!

"When the girl's . . . family learned about the letters, they took immediate steps to retrieve them. But there was the rub. The man to whom they'd been written no longer had them. They had just been stolen from him."

"Hm," said Ellery's father.

"No, no, Queen, he's above suspicion. Besides, we know the identity of the thief. Or rather," said Inspector Burke gloomily, "we're positive he's one of three men."

"Parties of our acquaintance?" asked Ellery.

"Undoubtedly, Mr. Queen, if you've browsed through your Rogues' Gallery recently. They're all Americans. One is the international jewel thief and society impersonator, William Ackley, Jr., alias Lord Rogers, alias le Comte de Crécy; another is the confidence man, J. Phillip Benson, alias John Hammerschmidt, alias Phil the Penman; the third is Walter Chase, the transatlantic cardsharp."

The Queens exchanged glances; Ackley, Benson, and Chase were three of Centre Street's incurable headaches.

"When the matter was turned over to the Yard, very hush-hush, I was placed in charge, and I bungled it." Inspector Burke's sensitive face flushed. "Word leaked out that something big was in the wind, and all sorts of mugs with guilty consciences ran for cover before we could tighten our lines. Among them were Benson, Chase, and Ackley — all three got away to the States. One of them — exactly which one we haven't been able to determine — subsequently made contact, with demands and instructions, and I'm here to pay off."

Inspector Queen clucked. "When and where, Burke?"

"Tonight, in my hotel room. I'm to hand him twenty thousand pounds in American dollars — in exchange, of course, for the letters. So tonight I'll know which of the three he is — and much good will it do me." The Englishman rose, tightening his lips. "And that's my tale of woe, Queen. I must ask you not to go near any of the trio — really my chief reason for stopping by. We can't risk another slip. Those letters must be repossessed and returned to England to be destroyed."

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"Can we give you any help?"

"No, no. Unless I botch it again — in which case," said Inspector Burke with a twisted smile, "you might offer me a job sweeping out your office. I shan't feel very happy about going back. . . . Well! Gentlemen, wish me luck."

"Luck," said the Queens soberly.

They recalled the bitter twist in Burke's smile the next time they saw him, which was in his hotel room the following morning. A chambermaid had found him. He had been seated slackly in the armchair beside the neatly made bed, a bullet hole in his powder-burned right temple. He had been dead since the night before. No shot had been heard; it was an ultra-modern hotel, with soundproof walls. The gun lying on the carpet below his right hand had already been checked in the police laboratory against the slug dug out of his head.

The room was the picture of peace. A Gladstone bag was spread on the luggage rack, undisturbed. The night table held Burke's pipe and tobacco pouch and a dog-eared copy of Shakespeare's plays with Burke's signature on the flyleaf. A dispatch case initialed *L. B.* lay, open and empty, on the bed.

"Poor Burke," muttered Inspector Queen. He handed Ellery a sheet of hotel stationery. "Found on the writing table. It has a couple of his fingerprints on it, and it's his handwriting — we've checked."

The script was even and unhurried, as if the brain directing the hand that had written it had reached a decision:

"Mine honor is my life; both grow in one;
Take honor from me, and my life is done."

— Lester Burke

"Epitaph by Shakespeare," murmured Ellery. "What went wrong, Dad?"

"Apparently his man came last night with the letters, as agreed, but while Burke checked them over — probably turning away slightly — the rat sapped him; Doc says there's a slight contusion toward the back of Burke's head. Then the doublecrosser took the money *and* the letters, and skipped. Guess he figures those high-born pash notes are good for at least one more transatlantic squeeze when the heat dies down, and meanwhile he's got some fifty-odd grand to tide him over. And when poor old Burke came to and realized what he'd let happen — and all it meant — he couldn't face the disgrace and committed suicide."

"There's no doubt it is suicide?"

"You name it. Bullet fired in contact with Burke's temple, angle of entry checks for a right-handed man, slug from Burke's own gun found with the body, Burke's prints on the stock. Suicide note in Burke's authenticated handwriting. Letters not here. Money taken. It's suicide, all right — the only question is which one of those three cuties crossed Burke up and

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drove him to it . . . Ackley, Chase, or Benson."

Benson, a gray-haired, dapper little man with a Florida tan, was located in a barber shop on Park Row having his nails manicured. The confidence man looked like a Wall Street broker or a corporation executive. He seemed annoyed.

"Don't know what you're talking about, Inspector," Benson snapped. "I can account for every second of my time all day yesterday until well after midnight. I was up in Westchester looking over some property with two associates of mine, we had dinner and spent the evening discussing the deal at the home of one of them in White Plains, and the other one drove me back to my apartment in town — dropped me off a few minutes past one A.M. Their names? Certainly!"

Benson's associates turned out to be two confidence men with slightly lesser reputations. However, they corroborated Benson's story, which was all Inspector Queen was interested in at the moment.

Chase was located in a midtown hotel at the tail end of an all-night poker game — a big, soft-spoken rancher type of man, whose drawl and slow movements ingeniously drew attention from the smooth lightning of his long white hands. No pigeon was being plucked; Chase's companions were professional gamblers.

"Relaxation," smiled the cardsharp. "Man gets tired playin' with rank amateurs. Last night, Inspector? Why, I've been right here since we started our game four o'clock yesterday afternoon. Haven't left this room. Have I, boys?"

Four heads shook emphatically.

That seemed to make it Ackley, whom they found at breakfast in a triplex Park Avenue apartment with its owner, a bejeweled society widow who was outraged at the interruption. Ackley was a tall, lean, handsome man with dark curly hair and piercing black eyes.

"Ackley?" echoed the lady furiously. "This gentleman is Lord Rogers, the big-game hunter, and his lordship has been entertaining me since the cocktail hour yesterday afternoon with his fascinating adventures in Kenya and Tanganyika —"

"Continuously, madam?" asked Inspector Queen politely.

"I — ah — put him up for the night," said the lady, coloring. "We — he retired at two A.M. Will you please get out!"

"After you, your lordship," said the Inspector; and the jewel thief shrugged and went along.

Ellery followed in troubled silence.

He was not to break that silence for a long time. For the three alibis remained unshaken, and Ackley, Chase, and Benson had to be released for lack of evidence.

"One of those alibis is rigged!" yelped the Inspector. "But which one?"

The letters and the money failed to turn up.

Inspector Queen raged and fumed,

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but the case had to be written off. Ellery fumed, too, but for other reasons. Something about the circumstances of Burke's death was wrong, he felt in his bones, but what it was he simply could not diagnose. And Inspector Burke's body and effects were shipped back to England, and the cables from London suddenly stopped, and that seemed the end of it.

But it was not, and it broke out again in the oddest way. One night, weeks later, Inspector Queen came home bemoaning the deterioration of the new generation of police officers. They had all reverted to childhood, the Inspector snorted at dinner, spending their spare time at headquarters playing games.

"Games?" said Ellery.

"Crime puzzles. They make 'em up and challenge one another to solve 'em. They've even got the Chief Inspector doing it! Though come to think of it," the Inspector chuckled, "one he tossed at me today is pretty darn clever. Typical detective-story situation: Rich man with three no-good heirs who need money bad. He's bumped off, one of the three did it, and each claims an alibi for the time of the murder. One says he was in the Museum of Art looking at some eighteenth-century American paintings. The second says he was dialing his bookie's private phone number, Aqueduct 4-2320, putting down a horse bet. The third says he was in a Flatbush bar talking to a French sailor named Socrates Papadapolis who was on his way to Indo-China. Question: Which alibi was the sure-enough phony? Get it, son?"

"Sure," grinned Ellery; but then the grin faded, and his fork bonged against his plate. "The Burke case," he choked.

His father stared. "The Burke case? What about the Burke case?"

"I knew we were played for suckers, Dad, but till you threw me that puzzle just now, I didn't see how!"

"How?" repeated the Inspector, bewildered.

"Burke didn't commit suicide — *he was murdered.* Take your crime puzzle," said Ellery swiftly. "The Museum of Art alibi and the Flatbush bar alibi might or might not have been false, and only an investigation would tell, but the phone-call-to-the-bookie alibi needs no investigation — it's false on the face of it. No one can dial an exchange like Aqueduct, which starts with the letters *AQ*, because every phone dial in the United States has one letter of the alphabet missing. *It has no letter Q.*

"And that told me what we'd missed in the Burke setup.

"Dad," cried Ellery, "*that note in Lester Burke's handwriting was a forgery.* If it was a forgery, Burke didn't write it. If Burke didn't write it, he didn't commit suicide — he was murdered. The devil sapped Burke, all right, and placed the unconscious man carefully in the armchair, shot him with his own gun, put Burke's prints on the gun and note, left the forged

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suicide note on the desk — the kind of note Burke might genuinely have written, a Shakespearean quotation — slipped out with the money and letters, and rejoined his alibi-ing confederates.

"But the fact that the note was a forgery identifies the killer. Ackley is a jewel thief and society impersonator. Chase is a cardsharp. Benson is a confidence man — but he's something else, too. One of his aliases is Phil the Penman — *a tag only a professional forger could have earned!*"

"Yes, but wait, wait," protested Inspector Queen. "But how do you *know* that the suicide note was a fake?"

"Benson pulled a boner. Do you remember how he spelled the word 'honor' — spelled it twice — in the quotation?"

"Honor?" The Inspector frowned. "H-o-n-o-r. What's wrong with that, Ellery?"

"Burke was an Englishman, Dad. Had he written that quotation, he'd have spelled 'honor' the way all Englishmen spell it . . . h-o-n-o-u-r. *It had no letter U!*"

'Q'

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ROBERT BRANSON**

TITLE: ***The Red-Headed Murderess***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Hsingping—in Szechwan, China

TIME: 1946-1947

COMMENTS: *He had come from Shanghai to consult a geologist and deliver some doilies; he found waiting for him a gruesome tale of jealousy and hatred among the missionaries.*

IN WEST CHINA WHEN THEY BURY the dead they heap the grave over with a round mound of earth. The cemeteries bulge with fat, grassy knobs.

There is such a cemetery at the edge of the northern Szechwan town of Hsingping, where I stepped off a river boat one rainy afternoon last September. The cemetery starts at the boat landing and curves down along the river. It lies under a long canopy of old trees. The grass on the graves is very green because there is so much dampness.

I had made the trip all the way from Shanghai to see a geologist named Hank Tyler who has been prospecting for oil two or three years up there. Since he had no idea when I was arriving, he was not at the wharf to meet me. I hired the only taxi in sight—a shabby old sedan.

The driver had considerable trouble getting the car started. It was fitted out to burn charcoal instead of gasoline, and he had to do something complicated to a stovelike contraption that was bolted on behind. I sat on the lumpy back seat, my clothes soggy with sweat and rain, and looked out into the cemetery.

I saw a man sitting there, about a hundred yards away, beside a grave at the edge of the river. The grave had a white cross on top. The man's outline was

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dimmed by mist and drizzle, but he was wearing a black Western suit and one of those U.S. Army sun helmets. I knew at once that he must be a Christian missionary paying homage to some departed Christian soul. From an old American lady in Shanghai, I had learned that there were two missionaries in Hsingping—a Reverend Sprague and a Reverend Fitzgibbons, one American, one English. The old lady, in fact, had insisted on giving me some table doilies for their wives.

The driver was still puttering with the charcoal burner. I leaned through the window and asked him who the man in the cemetery was. "Over there"—I pointed—"Is that Mr. Sprague? Is that the *megwa* missionary?"

The driver grinned and nodded and said something in Chinese I didn't understand. I wasn't convinced.

"Is it Mr. Fitzgibbons?"

He grinned and nodded again.

"Which one?"

"Yes, sir."

After a minute or two more of this, I gave up. I unstrapped my bag, dug out the package, and walked into the cemetery. I had neither umbrella nor raincoat, but I knew I could scarcely get any wetter than I already was. And the sooner I could get this errand out of the way, the better.

The sod was mushy underfoot and water dripped from the trees. As I approached, I could see that the man beside the Christian grave was drenched. He sat on a bamboo stool with his back to the flat, muddy water of the river, and his hands were folded in his lap. Drops of rain hung from the rim of his sun helmet. Certainly, I thought, this was above and beyond even a missionary's duties.

He watched me as I stepped along between the great humps of earth. He was young, not more than thirty. He had a thin bony face and a jutting Adam's apple. He wore steel-rimmed spectacles. His shirt was filthy and he needed a shave badly. Behind his spectacles, his eyes were dark and unfriendly. He neither smiled at me nor got up.

"Reverend Sprague?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm Sprague." His voice was as solemn as his face.

"I thought it might be you. I'm up here to visit Mr. Tyler. Before I left Shanghai, an acquaintance of yours—a Mrs. Crabbe—gave me something to pass along to your wife."

"That was thoughtful of Mrs. Crabbe," he replied very slowly, still not smiling. "She must not know that my wife was taken with cholera nearly a year ago." He nodded at the white cross. There was an awkward silence for a moment.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Well, I wish you'd take this package anyway. I think it's some table linen. Half

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of it's for you and the rest is for Mrs. Fitzgibbons. I'd appreciate it if you'd give it to her next time you see her and tell her where it came from."

Real pain seemed to creep into his dark eyes. His lips moved a little, but he said nothing.

"Mrs. Crabbe said everyone up here would know Mrs. Fitzgibbons," I said. "A woman with bright red hair."

Sprague looked down at the ground. I couldn't see his face.

"God forgive me for what I say, if He can," he said. "I wish that Mrs. Fitzgibbons were dead. I wish that she and her red hair and her blue beads and her husband were all in Hell."

Hank Tyler told me about the Spragues and the Fitzgibbonses that night as we sat on his veranda, smoking. Below us, the fires and lamps of the town swam through a curtain of drizzle.

"Sprague and his wife came out here from somewhere in the Middle West right after the war. He's a Christian missionary and this was his first overseas assignment. She was one pretty girl—long black hair and big brown eyes and a skin like peaches and cream. She couldn't have been more than twenty-two or so. They'd just been married, and Sprague was crazy about her. He was utterly and completely infatuated.

"She died during a cholera epidemic about six months later, and Sprague's been a little off his rocker ever since. He's there in the cemetery like that every day."

I asked Hank where the Fitzgibbonses fitted into the picture. He replied that Sprague held the Englishman and his wife responsible for the death. He lighted a cigarette.

"The Fitzes were old-timers out here," he said. "They had a big comfortable house with plenty of servants. When the Spragues landed in Hsingping in 1946, they didn't have any place to stay. The Fitzes persuaded them to move in with them.

"The cholera epidemic broke out about six months later. Sprague himself was away at the time—up-country on some kind of religious expedition. He didn't know anything about his wife's illness until he got back. That was three or four days after she died.

"Sprague found the village full of cholera and the Fitzes' house deserted. Mr. and Mrs. Fitz had cleared out to Chungking and left only a note behind them. The note explained how they'd done their best for poor Mrs. Sprague, and how they'd given her a fine burial, and that they were going to Chungking until the epidemic blew over.

"It nearly killed Sprague. The servants found him lying in the courtyard having some sort of fit. They put him to bed, and nursed

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him along with Chinese snake medicine, and finally he came out of it after about a week. I think he'd kill the Fitzes now if he ever got his hands on them."

"You can't hold anyone responsible for cholera," I suggested.

"No, you don't hold anyone responsible for cholera," Hank replied. "Sprague's completely irrational about the whole thing, of course. Like I told you, he's off his rocker. But I'll tell you something odd about it: I think he's righter than he knows."

Hank flicked the stub of his cigarette over the veranda railing and its red coal fell out of sight in a long slow arc through the rain. "Everyone here in the town is convinced that the Fitzes—or Mrs. Fitz, really—did the girl in with a hatchet. Pure murder."

"On what evidence?" I asked.

"Lots of it," he answered. "For one thing, the Fitzes never came back. They've dropped completely out of sight. But there's more to it than that."

This is what Hank told me: The Reverend Fitzgibbons was a big jovial Englishman of about fifty. His body was heavy with ale and overeating and years of leisure. Gardening was his most strenuous activity. He had a tremendous booming laugh, and everyone liked him.

"Jolly is probably the word for him," Hank said.

His wife could scarcely have resembled him less. Mrs. Fitzgibbons was waspish in both size and disposition. Her face was tiny and sharp, her mouth a thin straight line, her voice shrill. Her whole being was bent on destroying "filth," both physical and spiritual, and she ruled her husband, her servants, and the parishioners with a puritanical fury.

"I think she smiled once a year," Hank said. "Lord, but she was 'good.'"

She dressed austerely—long black or gray dresses, utterly plain; black cotton stockings; "sensible" shoes. Her only traces of plumage were her hair, which was a vivid carroty red, and a string of blue glass beads which had been her mother's and which she wore constantly. Because of her phobia about filth, she never left the mission compound without first masking her face in veils that hung from a black straw bonnet.

"She'd go to the market every morning looking like something out of H. G. Wells," Hank said. "You couldn't see her face—just a great gauze head."

When the Spragues came to town and moved in with the Fitzes, everything went well for a time.

"But after two or three months," Hank said, "the two women began feuding. Sprague's wife, as I've told you, was a really luscious young thing. Mrs. Fitz wouldn't like that. Apparently, she started

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nursing a little coal of jealousy. She started making the most embarrassing kind of accusations—claiming that Sprague's wife was making eyes at the Reverend Fitz, and so on.

"I don't know just how the coal grew—and it's not really too important—but apparently it developed into a white-hot, really pathological hatred. Things got to the point where Mrs. Fitz refused to talk to Mrs. Sprague, or even eat at the same table. The servants say she ordered the Spragues out of the house a dozen times. Sprague was making arrangements for a new house when he had to go up-country on that expedition.

"The servants claim none of them saw Mrs. Sprague the day she died. The cholera epidemic had been on about a week. The Reverend Fitz came down to the kitchen in the morning and told the cook to fix breakfast trays and a basin of scalding water. He said that Mrs. Sprague had come down with cholera in the night, and that he and Mrs. Fitz were staying at the bedside. He ordered none of the servants to come upstairs because of the danger of contagion.

"Early in the afternoon he came down for more food. He shook his head and looked glum, and told the staff that Mrs. Sprague was getting worse, and ordered one of the boys to ride to a village thirty miles away to fetch an American doctor. We figured afterward that this was just pure camouflage; Fitz knew damned well it would take at least twenty-four hours before the doctor could get to Hsingping."

I interrupted. "But I don't quite get this," I said. "You said Fitz was a good egg. Why should he want to murder the girl?"

"Undoubtedly he didn't," Hank said. "But that witch of a wife ruled him like a child. How she worked herself up to the act of murder is a question for a psychiatrist. But once the deed was done, she must have persuaded old Fitz to stick by her and cover up. The way we piece the thing together, Mrs. Sprague was lying dead all day up there in the bedroom. Mrs. Fitz probably did the job before daylight. And she and Fitz were standing guard over the body until night fell again."

"Anyway," Hank continued, "Fitz came downstairs a third time about eleven o'clock that night. He woke up the servants and told them that Mrs. Sprague, rest her soul, had expired. He gave two of the boys a wad of money and told them to wake up the coffinmaker down the street and bring a coffin back to the mission house at once. Then they were to go to the cemetery and begin preparing a grave; the burial must take place as soon as possible in the interest of the public health. Another boy was to go to the boatmen's quarter and

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hire a sampan for a trip downriver. The cook was to boil another kettle of water. And none of the servants was to pass beyond the foot of the stairs.

"The coffin arrived. Fitz lugged it upstairs himself. An hour later he came to the head of the stairs and called for the boys. The coffin was in one of the bedrooms, and its lid had already been nailed down snug. The boys got it downstairs and took it to the cemetery on a bull cart. Fiz stood by with a lantern, giving a running funeral oration, while they spaded it over with soil.

"That's about all there was to it. An hour or two before dawn, Fitz sent for two rickshas. He and Mrs. Fitz got into one, all bundled up for traveling, and the boys piled their luggage into the other. The sampan shoved off for Chungking, and no one's seen hide nor hair of the Fitzes since.

"They did send Sprague a note from the coast some weeks later. They said they had decided not to return to Hsingping—sadness of the memories, or something. They said they were making a new start, and told Sprague to take over their house if he liked. The letter didn't have any return address on it, only a Hong Kong postmark.

"But the rumors didn't really begin to circulate until one of the servants stumbled across a roll of bloodstained bedclothes and a hatchet. They'd been stuffed through a crack into a space between two walls, and it was pure miracle that they were ever discovered at all."

"Does Sprague know about that?"

"No," Hank said. "And no one in the village would think of telling him. He is much pitied."

I've had these details set down in my notebook for nearly a year now. It struck me they were ideal ingredients for a story. Jealousy and hatred among the missionaries. A pious murderess with red hair and a blue necklace. Death by hatchet in an upper bedroom, and a hasty burial by lanternlight in a Chinese cemetery. The grief-crazed devotion of a missionary who sits in all weather by the riverside grave of his bride—but who knows less about her death than the village gossips.

I've been intending to do a story for months. But I didn't have the ending for it until yesterday. I got a letter from Hank Tyler. It was a long letter, the bulk of it devoted to data for a series of articles I'm doing on China. Toward the end of the letter, Hank wrote:

"You may have read about the floods in Szechwan last month. Five people died here in the village and the damage was tremendous. One of those who died was Sprague, the missionary, whom I'm sure you remember. The man in the cemetery. He got soaked wad-

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ing around and died of pneumonia before anyone knew he was sick. He's undoubtedly happier dead, poor man. The flood brought his story to a nasty little finish in more ways than one.

"You'll remember that the cemetery was right beside the river. Well, the water spilled over into the cemetery and for a couple of days it pounded through there in a regular torrent. When the flood finally subsided, the cemetery was a mess. There was a good foot of mud and rocks and wreckage over everything, and about twenty of the graves had been washed out.

"They found Sprague's wife's coffin half buried in silt with part of the lid battered off. You know what they found inside? Some red hair and a string of blue beads . . ."

"O"

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**MICHAEL GILBERT**
TITLE:	***The Income Tax Mystery***
TYPE:	I.B.A. (Investigation Branch, Active)
LOCALE:	London
TIME:	After World War I
COMMENTS:	*We can't give you an American income tax story this year, but in many respects this British version is even more interesting. Certainly it is one of the author's most ingenious and winning tales . . .*

I QUALIFIED AS A SOLICITOR BEFORE the war and in 1937 I bought a share in a small partnership in the City. Then the War came along and I joined the Infantry. I was already thirty-five and it didn't look as if I was going to see much active service, so I cashed in on my knowledge of German and joined the Intelligence Corps.

When the War was finished, I got back to London and found our old office bombed and the other partner dead. As far as a legal practice can do so, it had vanished. I got a job without any difficulty in a firm in Bedford Row, but I didn't enjoy it. The work was easy enough but there was no real future in it. So I quit and joined the Legal Branch of Inland Revenue.

This may seem even duller than private practice, but in fact it wasn't. As soon as I had finished the subsidiary training in accountancy that all Revenue Officials have to take, I was invited to join a very select outfit known as I.B.A. or Investigation Branch, Active.

If you ask a Revenue official about I.B.A., he'll tell you it doesn't exist. This may simply mean that he hasn't heard of it. Most ordinary Revenue investigation is done by accountants who examine bal-

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ance sheets, profit and loss accounts, vouchers and receipts, then ask questions and go on asking questions until the truth emerges.

Some cases can't be treated like that. They need active investigation. Someone has got to go out and find the facts. That's where I.B.A. comes in.

It isn't all big cases involving millions of pounds The Revenue reckons to achieve the best results by making a few shrewd examples in the right places. One of our most spectacular coups was achieved when a member of the department once opened a greengrocers shop and—but that's another story.

When the name of Mr. Portway cropped up in I.B.A. records, it was natural that the dossier should get pushed across to me. For Mr. Portway was a solicitor. I can't remember exactly how he first came to our notice—you'd be surprised what casual items can set I.B.A. in motion: a conversation in a railway carriage, a hint from an insurance assessor, a bit of loud-voiced boasting in a pub. We don't go in for phone-tapping: it's inefficient and, from our point of view, quite unnecessary.

The thing about Mr. Portway was simply this: he seemed to make a very substantial amount of money without working for it.

The first real confirmation came from a disgruntled girl who had been hired to look after his books and fired for inefficiency. Mr. Portway ran a good car, she said; he dressed well, spent hundreds of pounds at the wine merchant (she'd seen one of his bills), and conducted an old-fashioned one-man practice which, by every law of economics, should have left him broke at the end of each year.

Some days he had no clients at all, she said, and spent the morning in his room reading a book (detective stories, chiefly); then he would take two hours off for lunch, snooze a little on his return, have a cup of tea, and go home. On other days a client or two would trickle in. The business was almost entirely the buying and selling of houses and the preparation of leases, mortgages, and sale agreements. Mr. Portway did it all himself. He had one girl to do the typing and look after the outer office, and another (our informant) to keep the books.

I don't suppose you know anything about solicitors' accounting, and I'm not proposing to give you a dissertation on it; but the fact is that solicitors are bound by very strict rules—rules imposed by Act of Parliament and jealously enforced by the Law Society. And quite right, too. Solicitors handle a lot of other people's money.

When we'd made a quiet check to see if Mr. Portway had any private means of his own and learned that he didn't, we decided

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that this was just the sort of case we ought to have a look at. It wasn't difficult. Mr. Portway knew nothing about figures. However small his staff, he had to have someone with the rudiments of accountancy, or he couldn't have got through his annual audit. We simply watched the periodicals until we saw his advertisement, and I applied for the job.

I don't know if there were any other applicants, but I'm sure I was the only one who professed to know both law and bookkeeping and who was prepared to accept the mouse-like salary he was offering.

Mr. Portway proved to be a small, round, pink-cheeked, white-haired man. One would have said Pickwickian, except that he didn't wear glasses, nor was there anything in the least owl-like about his face. So far as any comparison suggested itself, he looked more like a tortoise. He had a sardonic, leathery, indestructible face, with the long upper lip of a philosopher.

He greeted me warmly and showed me to my room. The office occupied the ground floor and basement of the house. On the right as you came in, and overlooking the paved courtyard and fountain which is all that remains of the old "Inn," was Mr. Portway's sanctum, a very nice room, on the small side, and made smaller by the rows of bookcases full of bound reports. My own room was on the left of the entrance, and even smaller and more austere. Downstairs were storerooms of old files and records and a strong-room which ran back under the pavement.

I have given you some idea of the small scale of things so that you can gather how easy I thought my job was going to be. My guess was that a week would be more than enough to detect any funny business that was going on.

I was quite wrong.

A week was enough to confirm that something *was* wrong. But by the end of a month I hadn't got a step nearer to discovering what it was.

I reported my meagre findings to my superiors.

"Mr. Portway," I said, "has a business which appears to produce, in fees, just about enough to pay the salaries of his two employees, the rent, lighting, and other outgoings, and to leave him no personal income at all. Indeed, in some instances, he has had to make up, from his own pocket, small deficiencies in the office account. Nor does his money come from private means. It is part of my duty as accountant to prepare Mr. Portway's personal tax returns"—(this, it is fair to him to say, was at his own suggestion)—"and apart from a very small holding in War Stock and occasional small earnings for articles on wine, on which he is an acknowledged ex-

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pert, he has—or at least declares—no outside resources at all. Nevertheless, enjoying as he does a minus income, he lives very well, appears to deny himself little in the way of comfort. He is not extravagant, but I would not hesitate to estimate his personal expenditures at no less than three thousand pounds per annum."

My masters found this report so unsatisfactory that I was summoned to an interview. The head of the department at that time, Dai Evans, was a tubby and mercurial Welshman, like Lloyd George without the mustache. He was on Christian-name terms with all his staff; but he wasn't a good man to cross.

"Are you asking me to believe in miracles, Michael?" he said. "How can a man have an inexhaustible wallet of notes if he doesn't earn them from somewhere?"

"Perhaps he makes them," I suggested.

Dai elected to take this seriously. "A forger you mean. I wouldn't have thought it likely."

"No," I said. "I didn't quite mean that." (I knew as well as anyone that the skill and organization, to say nothing of the supplies of special paper, necessary for banknote forgery were far beyond the resources of an ordinary citizen. "I thought he might have a hoard. Some people do, you know. There's nothing intrinsically illegal in it. Suppose he made his money before the war and stowed it away somewhere. In his strongroom downstairs, perhaps. He keeps the keys himself and that's one room no one's allowed inside. Each week he gets out a couple of dozen pound notes and spends them."

Dai grunted. "Why should he trouble to keep up an office? You say it actually costs him money. Why wouldn't he shift his hoard to a safe deposit? That way he'd save himself money and work. I don't like it, Michael. We're onto something here, boy. Don't let it go."

So I returned to Lombards Inn and kept my eyes and ears open. And as the weeks passed the mystery grew more irritating and seemingly more insoluble.

During the month which ensued I made a very careful calculation. In the course of that single month Mr. Portway acted in the purchase of one house for £5000, and the sale of another at about the same price. He drafted the lease of an office in the City and fixed up a mortgage for an old lady with a Building Society. The income he received for these transactions totaled exactly £171.5.0. And that was just about five pounds *less* than he paid out—to keep his office going for the same period . . .

One day, about three o'clock in the afternoon, I had occasion to take some papers in to him. I found him sitting in the chair be-

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side the fireplace, the *Times* (which he read every day from first to last page) in one hand, and in the other a glass.

He said, "You find me indulging in my secret vice. I'm one of the old school who thinks that claret should be drunk after lunch and burgundy after dinner."

I am fond of French wines myself and he must have seen the quick glance I gave the bottle.

"It's a Pontet Canet," he said, "of 1943. Certainly the best of the war years, and almost the best Château of that year. You'll find a glass in the filing cabinet, Mr. Gilbert."

You can't drink wine standing up. Before I knew what I was doing, we were seated in front of the fireplace with the bottle between us. After a second glass Mr. Portway fell into a mood of reminiscence. I kept my ears open, of course, for any useful information, but only half of me, at that moment, was playing the detective. The other half was enjoying an excellent claret, and the company of a philosopher.

It appeared that Mr. Portway had come to the law late. He had studied art under Bertolozzi, the great Florentine engraver, and had then spent a couple of years in the workshops of Herr Groener, who specialized in intaglios and metal relief work. He took down from the mantelshelf a beautiful little reproduction in copper of the Papal Colophon which he had made himself. Then the first World War, most of which he had spent in Egypt, had disoriented him.

"I felt the need," he said, "of something a little more tangible in my life than the art of metal relievo." He had tried, and failed, to become an architect, and had then chosen the law, mostly to oblige an uncle who had no son.

"There have been Portways," he said, "in Lombards Inn for two centuries. I fear I shall be the last."

The telephone broke up our talk and I went back to my room.

As I thought about things that night, I came to the conclusion that Mr. Portway had presented me with the answer to one problem, in the act of setting me another.

"There have been Portways in Lombards Inn for two centuries." The tie of sentiment? Was that perhaps why he was willing to finance, from his own pocket, a practice which no longer paid him? But where did the money come from? The more you looked at it, the more impossible the whole problem became.

As cashier, remember, I received and paid out every penny the firm earned and spent. And I knew—positively and actually knew—that no money went into Mr. Portway's pocket. On the contrary, almost every month he had to draw a check on his own bank

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account to keep the office going. Nor did he draw, according to his bank statements, any money from that or any other account.

So from what source did the substantial wad of notes in his wallet come? As you see, I was being driven, step by step, to the only logical conclusion: that he had found some method, some perfectly safe and private method, of manufacturing money.

But not forgery, as the word is usually understood. Despite his bland admissions of an engraver's training, the difficulties were too great. Where would he get the special paper? And such notes as I had seen did not look in the least like forgeries.

I had come to one other conclusion. The heart of the secret lay in the strongroom. This was the one room that no one but Mr. Portway ever visited, the room of which he alone had the key. Try as I would, I had never even glanced inside the door. If he wanted a deed out of it, Mr. Portway would wait until I was at lunch before he went in to fetch it. And he was always the last one to leave the office.

The door of the strongroom was a heavy, old-fashioned affair, and if you have time to study it, and are patient enough, in the end you can get the measure of any lock. I had twice glimpsed the actual key, too, and that is a great help. It wasn't long before I had equipped myself with keys which I was pretty sure would open the door. The next thing was to find an opportunity to use them.

Eventually I hit on quite a simple plan.

At about three o'clock one afternoon I announced that I had an appointment with the local Inspector of Taxes. I thought it would take an hour or ninety minutes. Would it be all right if I went straight home? Mr. Portway agreed. He was in the middle of drafting a complicated conveyance, and looked safely anchored in his chair.

I went back to my room, picked up my hat, raincoat, and brief case, and tiptoed down to the basement. Quietly I opened the door of one of the storage rooms; I had used my last few lunch breaks, when I was alone in the office, to moving a rampart of deed boxes a couple of feet out from the wall and building up the top with bundles of old papers. Now I shut the door behind me and squeezed carefully into my lair. Apart from the fact that the fresh dust I had disturbed made me want to sneeze, it wasn't too bad. Soon the dust particles resettled themselves, and I fell into a state of somnolence.

It was five o'clock before I heard Mr. Portway moving. His footsteps came down the passage outside, and stopped. I heard him open the door of the strongroom, opposite. A pause. The door shut again.

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The next moment my door opened and the lights sprung on.

I held my breath. The lights went out and the door closed. I heard the click of the key in the lock. Then the footsteps moved away.

He was certainly thorough. I even heard him look into the lavatory. (My first plan had been to lock myself in it. I was glad now that I had not.) At last the steps moved away upstairs; more pottering about, the big outer door slammed shut, and silence came down like a blanket.

I waited for nearly two hours. The trouble was the cleaning woman, an erratic old lady called Gertie. She had a key of her own and sometimes she came in the evening, and sometimes early in the morning. I had studied her movements for several weeks. The latest she had ever left the premises was a quarter to eight at night.

By half-past eight I felt it was safe for me to start investigating.

The storage room door presented no difficulties. The lock was on my side and I simply unscrewed it. The strongroom door was a different matter. I had got what is known in the trade as a set of "approximates"—blank keys of the type and, roughly, the shape to open most old locks. My job was to find the one that worked best, and then file it down and fiddle it until it would open the lock. (You can't do this with a modern lock, which is tooled to a hundredth of an inch, but old locks, which rely on complicated convolutions and strong springs, though they look formidable, are actually much easier.)

By half-past ten I heard the sweet click which meant success, and I swung the steel door open, turned on the light switch, and stepped in.

It was a small vault with walls of whitewashed brick, with a run of wooden shelves round two of the sides, carrying a line of black deed boxes. I didn't waste much time on them; I guessed the sort of things they would contain.

On the left, behind the door, was a table and on the table stood a heavy, brass-bound teak box—the sort of thing that might have been built to contain a microscope, only larger. It was locked—with a small, Bramah-type lock which none of my implements was designed to cope with.

I worked for some time at it, but without much hope. The only solution seemed to be to lug the box away with me—it was very heavy, but just portable—and get someone outside to work on it. I reflected that I should look pretty silly if it did turn out to contain a valuable microscope that one of old Portway's clients had left with him for safekeeping.

Then I had an idea. On the shelf inside the door was a small black tin box with *E. Portway, Personal*

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painted on the front. It was the sort of thing in which a careful man might keep his War Savings Certificates and Passport. It too was locked, but with an ordinary deed-box lock, which one of the keys on my ring fitted. I opened it, and sure enough, lying on top of the stacked papers inside, the first thing that caught my eye was a worn leather keyholder containing a single, brass Bramah key.

I suddenly felt a little breathless. Perhaps the ventilation in that underground room was not all it should have been. Moving with deliberation, I fitted the brass key into the tiny keyhole, pressed home, and twisted. Then I lifted the top of the box—and came face to face with Mr. Portway's secret.

At first sight it was disappointing. It looked like nothing more than a small handpress—the sort of thing you use for impressing a company seal, only a little larger. I lifted it out, picked up a piece of clean white paper off the shelf, slid the paper in, and pressed down the handle. Then I released it and extracted the paper.

Imprinted on the paper was a neat, orange, Revenue Stamp for £20. I went back to the box. Inside was a tray, and arranged in it were dies of various denominations—10s., £1, £2, £5, and upward. The largest was for £100.

I picked one of the dies out and held it up to the light. It was beautifully made. Mr. Portway had not wasted his time at Bertolozzi's Florentine atelier. There was even an arrangement of cogs behind the die by which the three figures of the date could be set—tiny, delicate wheels, each a masterpiece of the watchmaker's art.

I heard the footsteps crossing the courtyard, and Mr. Portway was through the door before I even had time to put the die down.

"What are you doing here?" I said stupidly.

"When anyone turns on the strongroom light," he said, "it also turns on the light in my office. I've got a private arrangement with the caretaker of the big block at the end who keeps an eye open for me. If he sees my light on, he telephones me at once."

"I see," I said. Once I had got over the actual shock of seeing him there, I wasn't alarmed. I was half his age and twice his size. "I've just been admiring your private work. Every man his own revenue stamp office. A lovely piece of work, Mr. Portway."

"Is it not?" agreed my employer, blinking up at me under the strong light. I could read in his chelonian face neither fear nor anger, rather a sardonic amusement at the turn of affairs. "Are you a private detective, by any chance?"

"I.B.A.—Investigation Branch of the Inland Revenue."

"And you have been admiring my little machine?"

"My only real surprise is that

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no one has thought of it before."

"Yes," he said. "It's very useful. To a practising solicitor, of course. I used to find it a permanent source of irritation that my clients should pay more to the Government—who, after all, hadn't raised a finger to earn it—than they did to me. Do you realize that if I act for the purchaser of a London house for £5,000, I get about £43, whilst the Government's share is £100?"

"Scandalous," I agreed. "And so you devised this little machine to adjust the balance. Such a simple and foolproof form of forgery, when you come to think of it." The more I thought of it the more I liked it. "Just think of the effort you would have to expend—to say nothing of obtaining special stocks of paper—if you set out to forge one-hundred-pound notes. Whereas with this machine—a small die, a little pressure—"

"Oh, there's more to it than that," said Mr. Portway airily. "A man would be a fool to forge treasury notes. They have to be passed into circulation, and each one is a potential danger to its maker. Here, when I have stamped a document, it goes directly into a deed box—and it may not be looked at again for twenty years. Possibly, never."

"As a professional accountant," I said, "that is the angle which appeals to me most. Now, let me see. Take that purchase you were talking about. Your client would give you two checks, one for your fee, which goes through the books in the ordinary way, and a separate one for the stamp duty."

"Made out to cash."

"Made out to cash, of course. Which you would yourself cash at the bank, then come back here—"

"I always took the trouble to walk through the Stamp Office in case anyone should be watching me."

"Very sound precaution," I agreed. "Then you came back here, stamped the document yourself, and put the money in your pocket. It never appeared in your books at all."

"That's precisely right," said Mr. Portway. He seemed gratified at the speed with which I had perceived the finer points of his arrangements.

"There's only one thing I can't quite see," I went on. "You're a bachelor, a man with simple tastes. Could you not—I don't want to sound pompous—but by working a little harder could you not have made sufficient money legitimately for your reasonable needs?"

Mr. Portway looked at me for a moment, his smile broadening.

"I see," he said, "that you have not had time to examine the rest of this strongroom. My tastes are far from simple, Mr. Gilbert, and owing to the scandalous and confiscatory nature of modern taxation —oh, I beg your pardon, I was forgetting for the moment—"

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"Don't apologize," I said. "I have often thought the same thing myself. You were speaking of your expensive tastes—"

Mr. Portway stepped over to a large, drop-fronted deed box, labeled *Lord Lampeter's Settled Estate*, and unlocked it with a key from his chain. Inside was a rack and in the rack I counted the dusty ends of a dozen bottles.

"Château Margaux. The 1934 vintage. I shouldn't say that even now it has reached its peak. Now here—" he unlocked *The Dean of Melchester, Family Affairs*—"I have a real treasure. A Mouton Rothschild of 1924."

"1924!"

"In Magnums. I know that you appreciate a good wine and since this may perhaps be our last opportunity—"

"Well—"

Mr. Portway took a corkscrew, a decanter, and two glasses from a small cupboard labeled *Estate Duty Forms, Miscellaneous,* drew the cork of the Mouton Rothschild with care and skill, and decanted it with a steady hand. Then he poured two glasses. We both held it up to the single unshaded light to note the dark, rich, almost black color, and took our first, ecstatic, mouthful. It went down like oiled silk.

"What did you say you had in the other boxes?" I inquired reverently.

"My preference has been for the great clarets," said Mr. Portway. "Of course, as I only really started buying in 1945, I have nothing that you could call a museum piece. But I picked up a small lot of 1927 Chateau Talbot which has to be tasted to be believed. And if a good burgundy was offered, I didn't say no to it." He gestured toward the *Marchioness of Gravesend* box in one corner. "There's a 1937 Romanée Conti—but your glass is empty—"

As we finished the Mouton Rothschild in companionable silence I looked at my watch. It was two o'clock in the morning.

"You will scarcely find any transport to get you home now," said Mr. Portway. "Might I suggest that the only thing to follow a fine claret is a noble burgundy?"

"Well—" I said.

I was fully aware that I was compromising my official position. Actually, I think my mind had long since been made up. As dawn was breaking, and the Romanée Conti was sinking in the bottle, we agreed on provisional articles of partnership.

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